THE oil business is mine,” declared the omniscient John D. Rockefeller in 1869 when he gave scope to his imperial dreams by beginning an unremitting contest to obtain a stranglehold on the oil refining interests of the nation. This desire for an economic empire, the majestic booty of black gold, called for the subversion of the time-honored commercial code of individualism, a “survival of the fittest,” and created a new economic order demanding the legal niceties of extortion, avariciousness and monopoly. Most of America watched the rise and early progress of the Standard Oil Company with an almost superstitious awe—for here was a monstrous would-be-monopoly of such nimble shiftiness, of such ruthless energy, of such remorseless logic that not even the bravest could resist. Yet in 1872, thirty thousand men engaged in the production of oil and scattered over a vast territory met and dramatically defeated this economic dinosaur—temporarily to be sure. Through their reckless enthusiasm and daring courage against a cunningly conceived South Improvement Company, independent oildom demonstrated to the country that in northwestern Pennsylvania, at least, small tradesmen were determined to challenge a heavily capitalized monopoly.

Able accounts of the conception and plans of the South Improvement Company can be found in other places. This organization,


2 Original descriptions of this experiment in large-scale combination were critical analyses based on the partisan *A History of the Rise and Fall of the South Improvement Company* (Oil City, Penna., 1872), written to support the stand of the Oil Regions. See Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York, 1904), I, 52 ff.; and Henry Demarest Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (New York, 1894), pp. 44 ff. More recently, the treatment has been somewhat sympathetic to Rockefeller’s attempts to bring order out of chaos in the oil industry. See John T. Flynn, *God’s Gold* (New York, 1932), Ch. IV; and Allan Nevins, *John D. Rockefeller* (New York, 1941), I, Ch. XIV.
chartered by the laws of Pennsylvania, was a bold gambler's
maneuver to seize the lion's share of the wealth of the so-called
Oil Regions, over two thousand square miles of productive wells
extending from the valley of Oil Creek and its tributaries down
the Allegheny River for some fifty miles. The magnitude of the
scheme, the scope of the intrigues, the tyranny of the operators
have given biographers of John D. Rockefeller a dramatic chapter
—the financial machinations of the "Mephistopheles of Cleveland."
Briefly, the venture called for a secret, ironclad coalition between
the leading oil-carrying railroads and the Cleveland refining coterie,
calculated to give exclusive control of the entire petroleum industry
to a single, gigantic, multi-million-dollar corporation, which would
establish fixed values for the product, and would restore the refining
interests, so long languishing, to a self-sustaining and remunerative
basis. This unity of action was secured by a clandestine re-
organization under Pennsylvania charter of a South Improvement
Company, a bargaining association in which all member refineries
took stock and shared proportionately in the profits of operation.
The principal officers of a railroad combination which included the
Erie, the New York Central and the Pennsylvania, anxious to end
their ruinous rate warfare and secure guaranteed shipments, nibbled
at the bait of this new Standard combine. With contemptuous
indifference to the implications involved, the railroad magnates
signed on January 18, 1872, a secret contract under whose terms
the South Improvement Company, through its president, Peter
H. Watson, pledged to ship forty-five per cent of all its eastbound
oil over the rails of the Pennsylvania and to divide equally the
remainder between the Erie and the New York Central railroads.
Shipments westward became the common property of the three con-
spirators. In return for these concessions the railroads sacrificed
their economic birthright, pledging to deliver the oil kingdom into

3 The original South Improvement Company was created on April 7, 1870,
by act of the Pennsylvania legislature. The combination under discussion
succeeded to the name and powers of this abandoned enterprise by a special
enactment approved May 6, 1871.

4 The evidence is incontrovertible that the South Improvement Company
was intended to be a mere tool of the Standard Oil Company. Ten of the
thirteen members of the association were active members of the Oil Trust. In
1879, an investigating committee of the New York Assembly officially con-
firmed this assertion, declaring, "The controlling spirit of both organizations
being the same." Pure Oil Trust vs. Standard Oil Company, Being the Re-
port of an Investigation by the United States Industrial Commission (Oil
the hands of Rockefeller and his associates by not only increasing freight charges on those oil shipments made by competitors of the South Improvement Company, but by giving the association rebates on all petroleum carried by them, be it shipped by members of the alliance or by competing parties. Where free trade and an unrestricted market had formerly closed the door to monopoly control over the oil refining industry, this capitulation of the eastern railroads and the secret discriminations in freight rates, rebates and drawbacks gave the South Improvement Company such a deadly competitive advantage that seemingly no one could escape the tentacles of the monopoly.

With a pistol levelled at their heads, the Cleveland refiners saw no alternative but to surrender, and by mid-February twenty of the twenty-five independent refineries of that city had sold out to the Rockefeller group. Pittsburgh oil dealers asked to be admitted into the fold, while seductive overtures were made to the New York operators. Those on whom the trap would close were the people of the Oil Regions of northwestern Pennsylvania, the original source of petroleum production, and here the monopoly envisaged no threat to its tyranny. After all, these people of the Creek, still professing an outmoded delusion of individualism, were seemingly incongruous and inharmonious masses of conflicting elements, broken up into mutually antagonistic factions—the producers contending against the refiners, the refiners pitted against the producers, and all parties jealous and suspicious of each other. As one of the hirelings of the South Improvement Company contemptuously declared, "The people of the oil regions have neither the brains, the backbone nor the means to counteract its influence."\(^5\) Whenever the association chose to tighten its pincers, its members reasoned, it could crush its competitors. How could a plan ever be devised for moulding the simple citizens of the Creek into any sort of shape capable of offering combined and effective resistance to a corporation whose assets totalled more than $250,000,000? Indeed, soon all would be "right" with the oil world!

Titusville, the de facto capital of the Oil Regions, became a resounding hall of whispers, burning with resentments, fears and

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\(^5\) Cleveland Plain Dealer, March 8, 1872. It is interesting to note that not one of the thirteen men who comprised the directorate of the South Improvement Company lived in the Oil Regions, or owned a single oil well or a piece of oil land. Lloyd, Wealth Against Commonwealth, p. 45.
passions. If the rumors rife in the business circles were true, that those railroads having their main lines or spurs extending into the petroleum district had conspired to advance the freights on all crude and refined oil shipped from the fields to the seaboard, then the Regions would surely be crushed and a death knell would be sounded to the restless hopes and visions of greatness which had nurtured the oil kingdom. In western Pennsylvania, self-assertive men had opened new lands of boundless resources and had fashioned a lusty, virile, booming world around them. Here they had developed such towns as Oil City, Pithole, Titusville, Titdoute, and Parker’s Landing, envisioning each to be a future metropolis of the wilderness. Alert to the new opportunities provided by the liquid gold, they had matched their energies against the vagaries of nature, gambling alone for fortune, each in his own way, all free from outside regulation. By allowing individual freedom of action in exploiting the Creek, these vigorous men had changed an agrarian civilization into a large-scale industry, fourth in importance in the nation’s economy. Now all this—lands, wells, franchises, tanks, derricks, pipe lines—seemed threatened by a small group of strong-willed men whose claim rested only upon force and collusion.

On January 22, 1872, the Titusville Herald sniffed the gathering storm by publishing a rumor of a probable eighty-cent advance in railroad freights on oil. When, however, on the first of the month the various railroads did not give notice of a rate increase to the shippers of crude and refined, the Oil Regions settled back in wary and sleepless vigilance. By the third week in February, the regional newspapers had succeeded in penetrating the veil of secrecy which cloaked the South Improvement Company. On February 21, the Titusville Herald printed more than rumors, bringing to light the plans and bookkeeping figures of this new combine. The Herald estimated that the association would realize from returns on rebates and drawbacks alone an annual elephantine plunder of $5,000,000, exclusive of the legitimate profits on refining. Next morning the

See Paul H. Giddens, *The Birth of the Oil Industry* (New York, 1938), for the ablest descriptions of the colorful personalities and competitive forces of the early days along the Creek.

Testifying before the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1873, Samuel C. T. Todd, later an attorney for the Standard Oil Company, estimated that the South Improvement Company would have realized an annual profit of $20,000,000 from the oil industry of Pennsylvania alone. Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, pp. 54-55.
Oil City Derrick, with the impetuousness of a journalistic infant scarcely five-months old at the time, took up the challenge of the combine, branding "The Big Bear Combination and Plundering Producers Enterprise" as banditti, "The Forty Thieves," and as a fiendish monster of prey, the loathsome "Anaconda." A day later the Derrick demonstrated the quickness of thought and fertility of resource that for the next month were to make its columns a household by-word along the Creek. Let the independents checkmate the attempted monopoly, the newspaper urged, by organizing a "North Improvement Company" to ship the oil northward and to "improve" the industry by new safety measures and vertical integration. Although some producers and dealers scoffed at the seriousness and practicability of the South Improvement Company and posted suggestive valentines in the Oil City Oil Exchange Building to show their contempt, the air was electric with expectancy. The men of the Regions waited for the brigands to show their ugly proportions, vengefully promising in their earthy vernacular that "a torpedo was filling for that scheme."

On Sunday, February 25, a little more than one month after the railroad contract had been signed, the South Improvement Company was exposed. That day an officer of the Jamestown and Franklin division of the Lake Shore railroad prematurely raised the freight rates for the little competitors outside the orbit of Rockefeller and his confreres. In effect, these new charges meant that members of the South Improvement Company would pay $1.50 on a shipment of crude from the oil centers to New York City, while those on the outside must pay $2.56, of which $1.06 was turned back into the combine's treasury. The association would hereafter pay forty cents for hauling a barrel of crude petroleum to Cleveland, while the independent refiners would pay a prohibitive eighty cents for the self-same barrel. Unless this rate advance was merely an independent action of the "Jimtown" road—and this was unlikely in such a competitive business—thirty thousand people depending upon the oil business for a livelihood faced imminent ruin, and their investments totaling $200,000,000 seemed doomed with the next turn of the screw.

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8 Oil City Derrick, February 24, 1872.
9 Ibid., February 23, 1872.
The answer came a day later when officials of the Titusville Oil Exchange received the following dispatch:

Advance in oil rates today. Oil in tanks from Corry to Boston, $2.29 per bbl; to New York, $2.14 per bbl. Refined in barrels, thirty-six cents more than the above.¹¹

The oil centers seethed with anger and excitement over this advance of $1.19 above the old rates. They quickly mustered their forces to meet head-on the invading monopoly which had materialized at long last. Every driller, engineer, fireman, teamster, tester, gauger, cooper, tank builder, prospector, "wildcatter," lessee, superintendent, property owner, merchant, lumberman, and clerk realized that inaction or complaisance meant the wreckage of his own individual enterprise. Business along the Creek came to a sudden standstill. Tempers rose in a mounting resentment. Impassioned orators poured forth their invectives from the steps of the public buildings while intimate groups boisterously engaged in tall talk along the glittering mahogany bars of the hotels, hurling lewd epithets at the greedy eastern railroads, damning Rockefeller and his Cleveland associates, and calling for instantaneous action against the smooth-tongued rogues who threatened to drain the blood and treasure of the Regions. Spontaneous local mass meetings met that very evening in Shamburg, Erie and Tidioute, where amid cigar smoke and whiskey, wildly shouting groups pledged their solidarity in the coming struggle.¹² The resolution adopted at the Tidioute meeting showed real tenacity of purpose:

Resolved, That we producers and citizens of this section are fully determined to devote our entire energies and means from now on to defeat the machinations of the "South Improvement Company," and that we will leave no stone unturned and exhaust all our resources to that end, and that we pick up the gage of battle thrown down by this gigantic monopoly, and will fight it out on that line if it takes all summer.¹³

All eyes turned to Titusville, the "Queen City" of the Oil Regions and its chief distributing point. The next night, Tuesday, February

¹² Titusville Herald, February 27, 1872.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Tidioute Commercial, February 27, 1872.
27, a public conclave was scheduled at Parshall’s Opera House “to consider the necessity of constructing a railroad from Erie, by way of Titusville, into the Oil Regions, as a competing railroad, connecting with water communication to New York and Europe.”

A furious mob gathered at this meeting, the first organized public demonstration by the entire Creek area against the unwelcome invader. Three thousand men representing the entire region crowded Titusville to its hotel facilities. Blaring bands and torch-light parades filled the streets of the city. Shouting delegates flaunting wrathful banners headed for the Opera House, where the stage had been ornamented previously with such slogans as “No Compromise,” “Down With the Conspirators,” “Never Surrender,” “United We Stand,” and “Don’t Give Up the Ship.” In speeches dripping with harsh vituperation the oil men castigated the refiners and railroad ring. Excitedly the demonstrators applauded a telegram from General George B. McClellan, president of the Atlantic and Great Western, to A. H. Steele, in which the former disclaimed participation in the South Improvement Company scheme. Their enthusiastic shouts gave way to hissing jeers when another dispatch was read, this time from Jay Gould, president of the Erie road, exposing McClellan’s hypocritical pretensions to piety by stating that the Erie had agreed to the coalition only after General McClellan had signified his personal agreement to the plan. These contradictory assertions were proof, indeed, that breaches could be opened in the defense walls of the opposition.

Other than passing lukewarm resolutions declaring their hostility to the “unholy conspiracy against the natural laws of trade,” exhorting the legislature in Harrisburg to repeal the company’s charter, and laying plans for a new regional railroad, the Titusville meeting accomplished little. Heckling and brawling were not enough in themselves to prevent the mighty combine from gobbling up the refineries of the Regions. The situation called for an organized, planned assertion of popular rights. What happened at Titusville was regrettable: embittered men came together under a deception on the one side and a misunderstanding on the other. One

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24 Titusville Herald, February 24, 1872.
25 Cleveland Plain Dealer, February 28, 1872.
26 Titusville Herald, February 28, 1872. The excitement of the Oil Regions attracted the attention of New York, Cleveland and Pittsburgh editors who received accounts of the Titusville meeting from on-the-spot correspondents.
27 Ibid.
selfish group tried to capitalize upon the existing excitement to get the whole area to further its pet railroad plans; while the other went naively into a railroad meeting for a purpose entirely foreign to its objects, namely, relief to the entire oil district. Consequently, all worked at cross purposes.

At this critical juncture the fiery Coleman E. Bishop, editor of the Oil City *Derrick*, together with William Hasson, John Archbold, and Jacob Jay Vandergrift, three aggressive independents of the Creek, seized the mantle of leadership. Scheduling a mass meeting for March 1, at Love’s Opera House in Oil City, they allowed themselves three days in which to perfect organizational plans and re-invigorate resistance strategy. Indeed, the outstanding position of the *Derrick* in crystallizing public opinion for the counter-attack against the South Improvement Company cannot be exaggerated. Wielding his literary cudgel with an unsparing hand, Coleman E. Bishop turned the battle into a moral crusade against commercial sin. His pungent pen coined the easily-remembered phrases: “The Monster,” “The Great Anaconda,” “The Bear Ring of ’72,” “The Forty Thieves,” “The Grand Conspiracy,” and “The Ring.” The *Derrick*’s “Black List,” which it carried in a daily box near the masthead, pointed independent oildom’s accusing finger at the hated octet who instigated the “hideous crime”—Peter H. Watson, Charles Lockhart, W. P. Logan, O. F. Waring, Jabez A. Bostwick, W. G. Warden, John D. Rockefeller and Amasa Stone. Bishop’s editorial thunder, his sarcastic jibes and peppery comments attracted a national audience. Rival journals freely quoted his witticisms, rebuked his extravagances and censured his sentiments. This type of vigorous journalism went far to make the Oil City *Derrick* the authoritative organ and spokesman for the whole oil region.

Oil City, Friday, March 1, provided no salubrious shelter for one sympathetic to the South Improvement Company. As though in answer to the *Derrick*’s exhortation of the previous day to “load down the trains [and] show the ring what a power they have got to meet,” eleven coachloads of grim-faced delegates from every oil town in the producing region unloaded at the local depot and stormed into Love’s Opera House. Here they heard the South Improvement Company bitterly denounced as an iniquitous conspiracy to “enslave whites,” and Peter H. Watson, its president, castigated as the “Judas” of the “grand larceny troup”; and they listened to
pleas made for union "against the common enemy." Resolutely they endorsed the establishment of a Petroleum Producers' Union, to which they pledged a general reduction of oil production by drilling no new wells for sixty days and by engaging in no Sunday work whatsoever. Above all, they approved a resolution to sell their crude oil exclusively to those refiners who had opposed the enticements of the Cleveland combine. If the productive output of the Creek were curtailed and the offending railroads and refineries were boycotted, these indignant operators reasoned that the monstrous "Anaconda" would slowly and deliberately be starved to death and victory would be a certainty. The meeting at Oil City provided the key to the entire resistance movement. Although the Cleveland Plain Dealer of March 5 sneeringly branded the establishment of a permanent representative group and the pledge of non-intercourse as the work of "soreheads" who had offered their services to the South Improvement Company and had been declined, their actions demonstrated to the nation-at-large that the wealth, determination, spirit and practical ability of the sons of the Oil Regions would be as one against the Rockefeller group.

The stormy days that followed belied the optimistic prediction of the "ringsters" that the clouds of antagonism would blow over. The South Improvement Company felt the full force of a three-pronged offensive directed against it—to undermine its legal bases by securing the repeal of the enabling charter and the passage of a free pipe bill; to keep popular indignation and wrath alive in the regional press and the mass meetings of the area; and to destroy forever the economic foundation of the Standard combine by non-intercourse agreements among the producers in the field. In spite of the heated passions and sizzling scorn of the two-fisted men of the Creek, the counter-attack was an orderly and planned movement, surprisingly free from mob violence. When, on Sunday, March 3, a three-thousand-barrel tank belonging to Peter H. Watson was tapped and about five hundred barrels of oil was wasted in the Allegheny River, both the Oil City Derrick and the Titusville Herald hastened to decry the act of vandalism. Intimating that Watson himself might have ordered the act to gain public sympathy

39 Flynn, God's Gold, p. 166; Oil City Derrick, March 2, 1872.
30 Cleveland Plain Dealer, March 4, 1872.
30 Flynn, God's Gold, p. 166.
or that one of his personal enemies had taken advantage of the current uprising to perpetrate the deed, the journals pleaded for sober, lawful actions to defeat the nefarious designs of the conspirators. Threats of violence, lynching and incendiaryism were common enough in the loud talk of the Regions, but the present author can find no evidences of overt acts to support the allegations of the Cleveland Leader that property was wantonly destroyed, or to maintain the indictment of the Philadelphia Commercial List that the resistance of the Creek was "only worthy of comparison with the lawless Ku Klux of the South."

Harping on the political theme that the loosely-worded franchise of the South Improvement Company empowered its directorate with almost illimitable prerogatives, the Oil City Derrick called for a delegation of one thousand men to go in a body to Harrisburg and demand relief from the "legalized robbery" of this "godlike-mighty organization." Carefully held out was the veiled threat that unless the legislative moguls ceased to become the passive henchmen of the Cleveland conspirators and consented to repeal the enabling charter of the Standard combine, thirty thousand voters of the oil area would swing away from the Republican party in the forthcoming election. The local Democratic Club of Oil City attempted to capitalize on this political heresy and informed all concerned that they had staunchly resisted "the encroachments of the iniquitous monopoly." Producer and worker alike hastened to join a newly-organized neo-Masonic order, "The Oilmen's League," whose secret rituals gave even more of a union of interests to the mounting wave of wrath. The Franklin Citizen translated the new fraternal spirit into political terms and freely predicted that a "solid phalanx" of the League would soon control the vote of the

21 Oil City Derrick, March 4, 1872; Titusville Herald, March 7, 1872.
22 March 5, 1872.
23 Quoted in Oil City Derrick, March 27, 1872. Samuel C. T. Dodd later opined that "had the companies not cancelled the contract which Scott and Vanderbilt and others had entered into, I venture to say that there would not have been one mile of railroad track left in the county of Venango, the people had come to that pitch of desperation. Industrial Commission Report, p. v.
24 February 29, 1872.
25 Oil City Derrick, March 7, 1872.
26 The constitution of the League, couched in vague generalities but indicating a quasi-trade union purpose, was printed in the Oil City Derrick, March 12, 1872.
Keystone State. On March 11, a petition measuring more than one hundred feet in length and bearing the names of some 5,000 producers, refiners and shippers of oil was forwarded to the Commonwealth legislature demanding the immediate enactment of a free pipe bill. Under the basic pipe act of 1865 only companies chartered by the state legislature could lay pipes for the transportation of either crude or refined petroleum. Although the established pipe corporations had not as yet crippled the oil trade by extortionate rates, they were in a measure monopolies and the current struggle was a battle against corporate privilege no matter what guise it assumed. If this branch of the petroleum business were thrown open to the general public, they reasoned, producers could become their own transporters and deliver the black gold of the Creek on the premises of the refiner, thereby striking a body blow to the railroad coalition. The Petroleum Centre Record even suggested going “back to the primitive mode of transporting oil by flat boats, to the seaboard at New Orleans.” On March 11, Mayor Bush of Buffalo visited a Titusville mass meeting to pledge $1,000,000 on behalf of his city, the sum to be used toward the construction of a railroad from Buffalo to Titusville. Ex-Senator Lowrie countered with an offer to bind the city of Erie to build one-half of a road to Titusville.

Sympathy came from all quarters. President Grant told visiting oil producers: “I have noticed the progress of monopolies and have long since been convinced that the National Government would have to interfere and protect the people against them.” The United States Senators from Pennsylvania, Simon Cameron and John Scott, kept their own political fences mended by circulating unsolicited letters denouncing “the outrageous railroad monopoly” and offering every legislative assistance toward breaking up the ring.

27 March 28, 1872, In a letter to the editor of the Oil City Derrick, March 25, 1872, an enthusiastic member from Parker’s Landing expressed the exuberant sentiment that the League was “a new Sampson, who will not be lured by the charms of Delilah, and who will cause greater consternation among the politicians and monopolists than did Sampson of old among the Philistines, and with a more insignificant weapon—the ballot.”
29 March 2, 1872.
Women of the Creek vowed to wear black velvet bonnets all summer in protest against the Standard monopoly. The Oil City Register drew upon the maxim, “give a dog a bad name,” to fan the fires of discontent:

South Improvement Company is not, we think, a fortunate title. One South Improvement Company invaded our State a few years ago. The ring was broken by General Meade, at Gettysburg. It is to be hoped the present one will be met in like spirit.

The Oil City Derrick recalled the history of the past conflict to advise General McClellan “to follow his old tactics and ‘wait’ before he moves on the enemy’s works in the oil regions. There is an army of men down here that can beat McClellan himself at drilling.” Both the Tidioute Commercial and the Emlenton Sun urged their readers to withstand the tremendous outside pressure being brought to bear upon them to capitulate to the “Anaconda.”

In Pittsburgh, however, the newspapers were remarkably reticent throughout the twenty-nine day struggle. At the outset the Dispatch, Post and Leader made brief allusions to the South Improvement Company, while the Commercial and Gazette studiously avoided the question. As the fight progressed, only the Commercial indicated a positive tolerance for the ring, although many Pittsburgh refiners had already succumbed to the Rockefeller sorcery. The Leader consistently played up the issue of popular rights and the injustices of monopoly control. Obviously, the editorials of the Cleveland journals, the Plain Dealer, Herald and Leader, tried to whitewash the attempted monopoly by developing the chauvinistic theme that success of the South Improvement Company would insure forever the commercial supremacy, independence and prosperity of the Cleveland refiners. In fact, the Cleveland Leader went so far as to legitimize the whole plan as a necessary reply to the “ambitious giants” of Titusville and Oil City who sought “to break down and swallow up the refining interests of Cleveland . . . and play the whole game themselves.”

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132 PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

33 Oil City Derrick, March 19, 1872.
34 Quoted in Cleveland Herald, March 4, 1872.
35 February 29, 1872.
36 March 2, 1872. The Oil City Derrick, March 16, 1872, complimented the Tidioute Commercial for its yeoman service against the Anaconda, promising its editor “the reptile’s hide for a trophy when we get it skinned.”
37 February 25, 1872.
Journalistic name-calling meant little to the imperturbable members of the ring, but when the dissenting oil men translated their non-intercourse resolves into a convincing program of action, the vulnerability of the South Improvement Company was exposed for all to behold. The entire oil country was divided into sixteen districts, each with a vigilance committee of five men whose duty it was to prevent the sale of a single gallon of oil to the Cleveland combine. A Producers' Protective Association, capitalized at $1,000,000, and headed by the resolute William Hasson, was formed to supervise the overall operation of the "squeeze." One hundred and twelve producers and dealers signed pledges to reduce production by suspending operations for sixty days and to resist the tempting offer of bribes by the agents of the South Improvement Company in the form of bids above the market price of oil. When F. S. Tarbell, father of the illustrious Ida M. Tarbell, refused a lucrative contract of $4.50 a barrel for his year's output of crude oil, the Derrick of March 21 applauded his noble action and gloated at the inability of the conspiracy to break up its "Roll of Honor." Coleman E. Bishop cleverly differentiated for his readers between Judas Iscariot and a man who sold oil to the hated combine: "Judas didn't deny the act, and didn't make any flimsy, fictitious excuses for the act, but went, like a man and hung himself. To the friends of the South Improvement Company—'Go, thou, and do likewise.' " The Philadelphia Commercial List branded as "arbitrary" the action whereby seven men—Joseph Bushnell, Joseph Seep, Daniel O'Day, H. W. Fawcett, John W. Alexander, George Huff and Joseph Battles—were branded as buyers for the ring, haled before the Producers' Association, and dismissed from the Oil City Oil Exchange. So bitter became the feeling along the Creek that when, on March 8, C. W. McClintock, editor of the Tidioute Journal, mistakenly published an item accusing one Joseph Bates of buying oil

80 Tarbell, History of Standard Oil Company, I, 292.
81 Oil City Derrick, March 4, 1872. The Pittsburgh Gazette, March 12, 1872, minimized the seriousness of these pledges, stating: "We are reliably informed that many of the largest producers refuse to enter into any combination, but aver that they will remain untrammeled, will conduct their business in their own way, and will sell their product to who ever will pay the most money, regardless of the South Improvement Company or any other company." Events of the next two weeks were to demonstrate the falsehood of this observation.
82 Oil City Derrick, March 16, 1872.
83 March 26, 1872; Oil City Derrick, March 27, 1872.
for the South Improvement Company, the court found the charge
scurrilous enough to permit a suit for libel.42 A correspondent for
the Petroleum Centre Record went so far as to advocate complete
social ostracism to squelch "the litter of little snakes spawned in
this Region by the big Anaconda."43

Though the Cleveland Leader of March 6 sneered that weeds
were growing in the streets of Titusville since the cessation of busi-
ness, unmistakable evidences pointed to the overwhelming success
of the counter-attack. The railroads felt the pinch of the crude oil
boycott and were visibly distressed. The Atlantic and Great West-
ern, whose rails had been boycotted as early as February 29, re-
stored its old rates, thereby openly breaking with the combine.
Cornelius Vanderbilt of the New York Central frantically wired
his agents to look for a face-saving way out of his agreement. The
Jamestown and Franklin road, losing several thousand dollars
daily, juggled its freight charges four times within a week. In Har-
risburg, a free pipe bill was about to pass both Houses to the con-
sternation of Tom Scott, whose Pennsylvania Railroad stood to lose
most by this action. The Oil City Derrick gleeefully reported that
the feeling against the South Improvement Company had spread to
Cleveland itself, where special police details had been set up to pre-
vent recriminations by the 2,500 men who had been made jobless
because of the activities of the ring and by those who had suffered
losses amounting to some $150,000, when the great barrel factory
of that city had filed a bankruptcy petition.44 Peter H. Watson's
anxious offer, on behalf of the South Improvement Company, to
compromise the existing difficulties fell on the deaf ears of the
adamant independents, who refused flatly to recognize the ring as
anything other than a combine bent on monopolizing the entire oil
industry.45

The decisive break in the Oil War of 1872 came on March 12
when, after days of hesitation and waiting, the Petroleum Refiners
and Dealers Association of New York City openly threw in their
lot with the independent interests of the Creek. This action was not
entirely unexpected. On March 8, in correspondence to the editor

42 Oil City Derrick, March 30, 1872.
43 March 19, 1872; Oil City Derrick, March 20, 1872.
44 March 6, 1872.
45 Tarbell, History of Standard Oil Company, 1, 76.
of the Titusville Herald, an anonymous writer asserted that he expressed the views of the greater portion of the New York refiners:

We in New York appreciate as fully as you can on the Creek, the importance of crushing in its inception this gigantic monopoly, and will be ready to co-operate with you when you have perfected your plans. You are in no more danger than we. The enemy strikes at the very vitals of the best part of the trade. There is no neutral group. It is either fight and win, or lay down and die. Which shall it be?

The next day the New York Times openly reported the growing sentiment that “the interest of the New York refiners . . . is with the oil producers.” After they indignantly refused an invitation to meet with representatives of the South Improvement Company as individual refiners rather than in a group, the New York Association resolved that their interest was “not in sympathy . . . with the South Improvement Company or any system of railroad transportation rebate in freights or carrying charges.”

News that the full resources of the New York Association had been thrown into the fray reached the Oil Regions simultaneously with the tidings of a humiliating legislative reversal. On March 12, the state legislators passed a free pipe bill to which the underlings of Tom Scott carefully tacked the following proviso:

Provided, that no line of pipe shall be laid, under the authority of this act, within five miles of the State line, for the purpose of carrying oil out of the State, and that the owners, producers, and shippers of all oil intended for Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York, using pipes laid under this act, shall give the preference to the lines of road traversing the greatest distance in this State, at the same rates of transportation.

The effect of this piece of legislative mockery was to prevent piped oil from moving out of the state and to restrict the right to employ competing lines of transportation. Headlines in the Derrick flayed this attempt to throttle the oil-producing interests: “We Have Met the Enemy and We Are Theirs,” “Our First Bull Run Battle,”

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“Tom Scott’s ‘Free’ Pipe Bill—Producers ‘Free’ to Pipe Oil for the Pennsylvania Railway,” and “Companion Legislation for the South Improvement Company.” The Titusville Herald sarcastically recommended that the legislature change the wordage of the enactment to read:

1. The privilege of laying pipe lines and building railroads is hereby declared free to everybody.

2. Provided, that whoever builds a pipe line must permit Tom Scott to control the same.

3. And provided that whoever builds a railroad, must, as soon as the same is finished, sell it out to Tom Scott, or have it confiscated.

Waiting for the legislature to repeal the obnoxious proviso might have taken all summer. Now that the New York oil men had joined forces with the Producers’ Protective Association and the legislature at Harrisburg had seen fit to laugh at their calamities, the situation called for new stratagems. Since the tightened crude oil embargo showed the railroads to be the vulnerable link in the South Improvement chain, the independents concentrated all their efforts on cutting loose the railroad interests from the monopoly. Exposure of the rôle of the Erie road in Boss Tweed’s political skullduggery in New York, the stench of the Crédit Mobilier scandal in the nation’s Capitol, and the current indictment of the price-fixing scheme with the South Improvement Company had turned the full force of public opinion against this tool of monopoly. Railroad men grew panicky as newspapers in Boston and New York informed their readers that the oil war could be reduced to a simple equation of a band of heroic liberty-lovers fighting the powerful foes representing corporate monopoly and railroad extortion. Compromise with the refiners of the Creek provided the only way for the railroads to escape from under the whip-lash of popular scorn and the threat of a possible legislative investigation which they could ill afford.

48 March 14, 1872. Evidently the Titusville correspondent for the New York World failed to read the bill carefully. His dispatch bearing the date-line March 12 painted the legislative “victory” in such roseate terms that the headline caption read “Monopoly Defeated.”

49 March 15, 1872. The article indicted Tom Scott’s legislative interference by mockingly recommending, among other proposals, that “no farmer will hereafter be allowed to sell eggs (except from Pennsylvania hens) until all the eggs of Tom Scott’s hens have been disposed of at his own price.”
Ida M. Tarbell, in her monumental two-volume work, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, covered fully the negotiations of March 18-25, which resulted in the capitulation of the railroads. The committee of twelve representing the independents had too powerful a weapon in its crude oil blockade to accept anything other than the railroads' complete repudiation of the special contract with the South Improvement Company. As early as the second day of the negotiations the independents felt certain that victory was within their grasp. In a telegram, dated March 19, and dispatched to the chairman of a mass meeting at Parker's landing, the oil men voiced their confident optimism:

The enemy is retreating but keeps firing from the rear though his body is hurt. The railroads are almost unanimous in encouraging us in the belief that the roads will back out of contract, and are sure at least to give us fair, uniform and permanent rates. . . . Don't let any one sell the monopoly a barrel. The roads are feeling the pressure and are anxious to help us. Creek and New York refiners arranged their differences this evening and are to make a united demand on the railroads Tuesday next.

On March 25, after twenty-nine days of battle, the oil war was over. The six-hour conference held at the Grand Opera House in New York City to resolve the differences between the railroad and the oil men was interrupted dramatically by John D. Rockefeller and Peter H. Watson, demanding a last minute hearing, but the committee of twelve refused to recognize or listen to a representative of their hated adversary. In the end, the railroads agreed to restore their old charges on crude and refined oil and to transport all freight shipments upon "a basis of perfect equality to all shippers, producers and refiners, and that no rebates, drawbacks, or other arrangements of any character should be made or allowed." With the retreat of the railroads, the South Improvement Company collapsed; its charter was revoked by the Pennsylvania legislature on April 2. The "Anaconda" was slain; the Oil Regions rejoiced.

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50 I, 89-94.
51 Oil City Derrick, March 21, 1872.
52 This incident was described in detail the next day by a reporter for the New York Times.
53 See Industrial Commission Report, p. 351, for text of the agreement.
in the rosy flush of victory; the nation heralded the collapse of a would-be monopoly.

It is true that the triumph of the Creek was short-lived and that the economic stresses of the panic of 1873 gave John D. Rockefeller his opportunity to annex the oil area to his Standard domain. This fact, however, fails to taint the stirring picture of the events from February 26 to March 25, 1872, nor to minimize their grandeur. These twenty-nine hectic days demonstrated to the entire nation the strength of an enlightened public opinion against an omnivorous monopoly. Stimulated to a high pitch of martial spirit by their local press, the Oil Regions fought back with the enthusiasm of amateurs. Out of their midst emerged leaders displaying such qualities of craftiness, promptitude and boldness as to stamp themselves worthy foes of the impassive Rockefeller and the sanctimonious Watson. The Pittsburgh Gazette erred when it called the meetings of the producers “mere sensational assemblies run by small politicians.” This was no “tempest in a tea-pot” as the Pittsburgh Dispatch insisted or “useless excitement” as the Pittsburgh Chronicle maintained.54 Henry Demarest Lloyd came closest to the truth when he called the excitement “an uprising of the people, passionate but intelligent and irresistible.”55 Out of mass meetings, that for numbers in attendance and enthusiasm manifested were never equalled save during the early days of the Civil War, came the resolve of the little people to fight the giant monopoly. The immediate victory of an economic underdog through collective action gave all believers in individualism an inspiring impetus to seek out economic injustice and to array themselves squarely against special privileges. It mattered not whether oil would be refined in Titusville or Cleveland, Oil City or Pittsburgh, just so long as a monopoly control did not dictate the final choice. In this sense, the Oil War of 1872 must be viewed not merely as a local flurry but as an integral part in the traditional American struggle of the many against the few.

54 Quoted in Pittsburgh Leader, March 27, 1872.
55 Wealth Against Commonwealth, p. 57.