



Waite Phillips donated most of the land that is now Philmont Scout Ranch to the Boy Scouts of America.

Oil Baron with a Heart

Hardworking Waite Phillips believed in sharing the wealth

BY MARIA BLACKBURN

Waite Phillips was an oil baron and businessman whose success in the oil fields of Oklahoma and prowess as a real estate investor made him a millionaire many times over. Phillips was good at making money. But he was even better at giving it away.

Phillips' philanthropic efforts included such acts of generosity as giving his 127,000-acre New Mexico ranch to the Boy Scouts of America, donating his elaborate 72-room Italianate mansion and 22 acres of lavish gardens to the city of Tulsa for an art museum and supporting a variety of civic, educational and humanitarian causes ranging from Catholic hospitals to community centers. He enjoyed hunting for money more than he did

holding it, and so he made sharing his earnings with others one of his greatest priorities.

"The only things we keep are those we give away," Phillips said once. "All things should be put to their best possible use."

Phillips was born on a 40-acre farm outside of Conway, Iowa, on Jan. 19, 1883. One of 10 children born to Lucinda and Lewis Phillips, Waite admitted he had "restless feet" and at the age of 16 he left home with his identical twin, Wiata, to explore the West. They traveled by freight train, working here and there as they went. Three years into their journey, Wiata had appendicitis and died in Spokane, Wash. Waite was devastated. "That was

a terrible loss for my dad," Elliott "Chope" Phillips said in a "Voices of Oklahoma" oral history interview in 2009. "They were almost like the same person. They thought alike and they were just inseparable."

Waite worked a few different jobs before taking a bookkeeping job with his brothers Frank and L.E., who would go on to found Phillips Petroleum in 1917. He worked for his brothers for 11 years, learning the oil business from the ground up, first as a roustabout and then as a field superintendent. In 1909, he married Genevieve Elliott, a banker's daughter. Then in 1914 at the age of 31, Waite decided to withdraw from his brothers' oil interests in Oklahoma and go out

on his own. Frank, who was as strong-willed as his younger brother, wasn't happy with the decision. "We Phillipses just can't get along with each other when it comes to business," he said.

Waite Phillips didn't strike it big at first in the oil fields, but his persistence and hard work paid off and within a few years he built up a fully

integrated oil company that combined production, refining and marketing. By the time he was 38, his wells were producing 40,000 barrels a day.

Phillips maintained that he was lucky, but luck wasn't the sole reason for his success. He worked six days a week and believed in buying leases everywhere there might be oil. If he struck it rich, he shared the wealth with his employees. "There is greater

"There is greater honor in being the best ditch digger in a gang than in being a mediocre president of a company."

honor in being the best ditch digger in a gang than in being a mediocre president of a company, because the first man has done something by means of his own efforts, while the latter is content to let the dignity of his position bear him along," he is quoted as saying in *Oil Man: The Story of Frank Phillips and the Birth of*

Phillips Petroleum by Michael Wallis (St. Martin's Griffin, 1988).

In 1925, he sold the Waite Phillips Co. for \$25 million cash (\$311 million today), and by the next year, 43-year-old Waite was worth \$40 million (nearly \$500 million today). He turned his attention to investing in stocks and bonds, real estate investing and ranching. He bought a sprawling ranch in the mountains of New Mexico and

named it Philmont; he loved to go there and fish and relax. In 1927 he built Philbrook, his grand mansion in Tulsa with marble floors and elaborate gardens. Humorist Will Rogers upon entering Philbrook's great hall remarked, "Well, I've seen Buckingham Palace, but it hasn't anything on Waite Phillips' house."

The oil baron proved to be as smart in philanthropy as he was in business. When he donated his Tulsa mansion to the city and his New Mexico ranch to the Boy Scouts of America, he included office buildings as part of the gifts to provide income that would help support the properties and allow them to be shared with visitors for years to come.

"He thought that money should be used as a tool to help people, help society, help something," Chope Phillips said of his father, who died in 1964 at the age of 81. "And if you aren't going to put it to good use, then you shouldn't have it." ■

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