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ONEOK

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Introduction

ONEOK, Inc., a name pronounced “one-oak,” is woven deeply into the fabric of American industry and energy. Over the course of more than a century, this company has evolved from a local gas utility in Tulsa, Oklahoma, into a formidable player in the North American midstream energy sector. As a member of the S&P 500, Fortune 500, and among the largest pipeline operators in the United States, ONEOK’s journey is a remarkable story of entrepreneurship, innovation, adaptation, and strategic vision.

Founded in 1906 as the Oklahoma Natural Gas Company, ONEOK began with little more than the determination to serve the burgeoning energy needs of a young state. From the construction of a trailblazing gas pipeline just months after Oklahoma’s statehood, to its ambitious expansion across rural communities, the company’s early years set the stage for a legacy defined by progress. It wasn’t long before ONEOK had established itself as a regional cornerstone, serving families and industries with reliable access to natural gas.

But, as the American energy landscape transformed, so too did ONEOK. The tides of deregulation, the growing demand for natural gas liquids, and the shift towards midstream specialization spurred a series of bold moves: new business lines, innovative technologies, and a series of strategic acquisitions that would propel the company to national prominence. The transition from Oklahoma Natural Gas to ONEOK signaled more than just a name change—it marked a comprehensive reimagining aimed at meeting the country’s rapidly diversifying energy needs.

At the heart of ONEOK’s story lies not only technical achievement, but also the company’s deep commitment to responsible stewardship—financially, environmentally, and socially. With its fee-based business model, consistent financial growth, and ongoing infrastructure investments, the company has weathered industry cycles and emerged stronger with each decade. Moreover, ONEOK has been a leader in embracing sustainability, with ambitious emissions-reduction targets and innovative programs to support low-carbon solutions, earning top ESG ratings and the respect of both investors and the communities it serves.

This book aims to chronicle the history and evolution of ONEOK: its founding, pivotal moments of transformation, the people who have shaped its culture, the challenges encountered, and the opportunities ahead. Drawing on the company’s extensive archives, public records, and expert analysis, the following chapters explore how ONEOK became a guiding force in American infrastructure—supplying energy to millions, building vital connections, and preparing to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing future.

By delving into ONEOK's century-long trajectory—from its humble beginnings to its current status as an industry leader—this book seeks not only to recount a corporate history, but to illuminate the broader trends of American energy, innovation, and enterprise. The story of ONEOK is, in many ways, the story of the changing face of America—and a lens through which we can better understand the past, present, and future of our energy landscape.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Birth of Oklahoma Natural Gas Company

The nascent years of the 20th century in America were a period of explosive growth and boundless opportunity, particularly in the burgeoning energy sector. New discoveries of oil and natural gas were transforming local economies and igniting dreams of wealth and progress. In the heart of this transformative era, a fledgling territory on the cusp of statehood, Oklahoma, was about to play a pivotal role. It was here, amidst the dust and ambition of early Tulsa, that the seeds of what would become ONEOK were sown.

The story begins with two ambitious businessmen, Dennis T. Flynn and Charles B. Ames. Both men were keenly aware of the vast natural gas reserves lying beneath Oklahoma's soil and the immense potential they held for powering homes and industries. At this time, reliable and affordable energy was a luxury in many parts of the developing nation, and the promise of natural gas offered a cleaner, more efficient alternative to coal and wood. Flynn and Ames envisioned a company that could harness this abundant resource and deliver it to the rapidly expanding communities of Oklahoma.

On a crisp autumn day, October 12, 1906, their vision materialized with the official founding of the Oklahoma Natural Gas Company, or ONG as it would be known for decades. The company's initial focus was pragmatic and essential: to meet the escalating demand for natural gas in the Tulsa area. Tulsa, already a bustling hub of commerce and a magnet for those seeking their fortune in the oil and gas fields, provided the perfect crucible for such an endeavor. The energy needs of its residents and businesses were growing exponentially, and ONG aimed to be the answer.

The challenges facing Flynn and Ames were considerable. Building a reliable natural gas distribution system from scratch in a relatively undeveloped territory required not only capital but also ingenuity, persistence, and a willingness to brave the harsh realities of pioneering infrastructure. Roads were often rudimentary, heavy machinery was scarce, and the sheer scale of the undertaking—laying pipelines across vast stretches of often rugged terrain—was daunting.

Despite these hurdles, the entrepreneurial spirit that defined the era pushed them forward. Their immediate goal was to connect the gas fields to the eager consumers. This meant surveying land, securing rights-of-way, and meticulously planning a network of pipelines that could withstand the pressures of transportation and the test of time. It was a monumental task, but the potential rewards were equally immense:

providing a vital service that would literally fuel the growth of Oklahoma.

A mere fourteen months after its founding, and significantly, just shy of a month after Oklahoma officially became the 46th state in the Union, ONG celebrated a monumental achievement. On December 28, 1907, the company completed a 100-mile natural gas pipeline. This engineering marvel, a testament to the company's early ambition and capabilities, stretched from the rich gas fields of Osage County to the burgeoning towns of Sapulpa and Oklahoma City. The cost of this ambitious project was a considerable \$1.7 million, a significant investment for the time, highlighting the scale of their commitment.

This pipeline was more than just a conduit for natural gas; it was a lifeline for the communities it served. It brought the warmth of natural gas to homes, the power to burgeoning industries, and the promise of a brighter future. For the residents of Sapulpa and Oklahoma City, the arrival of natural gas meant greater comfort, increased efficiency, and a significant step forward in their quality of life. For ONG, it signaled the successful culmination of its foundational endeavor and laid the groundwork for future expansion.

The rapid pace of development continued. By 1910, just four years after its inception, Oklahoma Natural Gas Company had already reached another significant milestone: the construction of Oklahoma's very first compressor station. This was a crucial technological advancement for the young company. Compressor stations are vital for maintaining the pressure of natural gas as it travels through pipelines, ensuring efficient and continuous delivery over long distances. This addition demonstrated ONG's commitment to adopting cutting-edge technology and optimizing its operations for reliability and scale.

The early years of ONG were characterized by this relentless drive for expansion and improvement. The company understood that its growth was inextricably linked to the growth of Oklahoma itself. As new towns sprang up and existing communities expanded, the demand for natural gas followed suit, and ONG was determined to be there to meet it. This period set the tone for the company's future, establishing a culture of strategic investment in infrastructure and a focus on serving a widening customer base.

By 1919, the scope of ONG's operations had grown dramatically. What began as a local utility serving the Tulsa area had blossomed into a regional powerhouse. The company now supplied natural gas to 37 communities across Oklahoma, its network of pipelines stretching for over a thousand miles. This extensive infrastructure was a testament to the foresight of its founders and the dedication of its employees, who tirelessly worked to lay pipe, maintain facilities, and ensure the uninterrupted flow of energy.

The transformation was evident not only in its physical footprint but also in its financial standing. The company's increasing reach and reliable service made it an attractive investment. In 1917, a mere eleven years after its founding, Oklahoma Natural Gas Company achieved a significant mark of corporate maturity and financial stability: it was listed on the New York Stock Exchange. This was a pivotal moment, signaling the company's transition from a regional enterprise to a publicly traded entity with national visibility. It opened new avenues for capital, allowing for even greater expansion and solidifying its position within the broader American economic landscape.

The initial decades of Oklahoma Natural Gas Company were a vibrant period of foundation building. It was a time when the entrepreneurial spirit of the American West met the industrial ambition of the East, resulting in the creation of a vital energy company. From those first intrepid pipelines to the establishment of advanced compressor stations and its debut on the New York Stock Exchange, ONG rapidly transformed from a promising startup into a critical infrastructure provider. Its early successes would lay the groundwork for a century of evolution and adaptation, shaping its identity and preparing it for the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead in the dynamic American energy industry. The story of ONEOK, therefore, truly begins in these formative years, with the bold vision of two men and the unwavering pursuit of a burgeoning industry in a young state.

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