

“Desk and Derrick: How the Women’s Petroleum Industry Club Helped Envision Oil’s Technocratic Future,” *Technology and Culture* -- submitted

Sarah Stanford-McIntyre
sstanfordmcintyre@gmail.com

Desk and Derrick was a female-only petroleum industry employees’ club. It was founded and run by industry women in an effort to educate secretarial and administrative staff in oil technology and science. With a membership of more than 10,000 in the US and Canada, throughout the 1950s and 1960s the club was a haven for working women, providing community, training, and leadership opportunities in an industry deeply hostile to female employees. While few scholars have paid attention to the role of women in the oil industry, the history of Desk and Derrick reveals broad changes to the oil industry workforce, connecting internal industry battles over refinery automation and the decline of industrial unions to the spread of postwar oil-fueled consumer abundance and narratives of US technological empire.

Desk and Derrick’s numerous outreach and educational campaigns included seminars, workshops, fieldtrips and conventions. These events showcased female competence and technical knowledge, clashing with union derision and corporate dismissal. At the same time, through their focus on the power and importance of industry research and development, oil’s female clerical staff became key promoters of anti-union sentiment and advocates for industry corporate benevolence. Desk and Derrick valorized industry engineers and scientific professionals, spreading narratives of prosperity through technology that coincided with industry-wide efforts to repair oil companies’ reputations as greedy, wasteful, and exploitative. Oil companies promoted Desk and Derrick as a convenient, grassroots way to spread their message. Desk and Derrick took advantage of this need, increasing women’s profile as the face of the industry in oil producing communities throughout North America.