

Petroleum Industry in Pennsylvania

With the cost of petroleum products on everyone's mind these days, it might be interesting to look at the early years of that industry, especially as it took place in western Pennsylvania, west of the territory that once had been assigned to the colony of Connecticut.

Western Pennsylvania, along with a small section of New York State, furnished nearly all the country's supply of petroleum for some years following the discovery of its value for illuminating purposes. The mineral was made known to white men by the Native Americans, who sold it under the name of Seneca oil, as a cure for various ills, and burned it at some of their ceremonies. It was not until the middle of the 19th century that its value as an illuminating oil became known, and not until 1859 was the first petroleum well drilled. This was the Drake well, in Titusville; it was about 70 feet in depth, and when 25 barrels were pumped from it in a day its production was considered enormous. By the close of 1861 wells had been drilled from which 2000 to 3000 barrels flowed in a day without pumping. Until about 1890 Pennsylvania produced 80% of all petroleum products in the United States.

In an article in "The Winsted Press", March 15, 1877, there is an article entitled "New discoveries of oil". It was written from Bradford, Pennsylvania, the area in which the new discovery had taken place. The reporter wrote the piece with the intent of catching the eye of those who have dreams of becoming rich over night by whatever means happens to present itself at the moment. History is full of such cases; gold discoveries probably top the list, but other minerals, usually those that do not require much of an investment, are always popular. And so it is with petroleum; at first it did not require sophisticated machinery, and as the value of the land was quite low, investors could buy up large tracts for very little money. The text of this Winsted newspaper account says:

"Within the past sixteen months (beginning December, 1875) not less than \$10,000,000 has been invested within a circuit of twenty miles. Land that two years ago would have been dear at any price now sells at \$1,000 an acre. Within a distance of four miles three flourishing towns have sprung into existence, and the town of Bradford, formerly consisting of a lumberman's tavern and a few scattered farmhouses now has 3,500 inhabitants. It is a singular fact that an early operator in the Bradford region could not strike anything but 'dry holes'; the reverse follows the present drilling. Out of the hundreds of wells put down not half a dozen have proved failures. At Olean and other points in Cattaraugus County, and as far into Allegany as Cuba, wells are being sunk. The oil of the Bradford district is found at a greater depth than in the old region. Some wells are as deep as 1,400 feet, but the average depth is 1,100. The so-called 'second sand' of Bradford is the third, or oil-bearing sand of the lower districts. Wells that were drilled by the first operators in the valley to the depth of the holes in the original territory, and then abandoned, have been drilled deeper and the oil-rich rock found.

Another peculiarity of the Bradford wells is that none of them are what they call large-producing, the average being about ten barrels a day. This fact, instead of being a detriment, as the people in the lower regions affirm, is claimed to be an advantage by the Bradford operators. They argue that the territory being large and the wells small, the

danger of exhaustion is much less than it is in the lower territory, where the oil areas are small and the wells large producers.

“While much of the land in this valley has been purchased outright by operators, a majority of the wells are drilled on leased lands, paying a royalty to the owners.

There are three pipelines connecting the wells with the Erie Railway at Olean, thirteen miles distant. A line is also to be constructed to sixty miles distant. A branch of the Erie RR runs the entire length of the oil district, from Carrolton, N. Y. The business on this branch was a few months ago \$3,500 a month; it is now \$35,000. Capital is still pouring into the valley, and every available piece of ground is seized upon at once. The very dooryards are invaded by the derrick and drill.”

“The most noticeable case of sudden wealth is that of an Irishman named Mike McCarthy, who until recently was a switch tender in the employ of the Erie Railway at Salamanca, and is extremely intemperate. His father, who died a few years ago, left the farm to Mike. To pay the taxes on the property was more than Mike could do, and it could have been purchased at almost any price. Two years ago he was offered \$1,500, when the oil fever was in its incipient stage, and Mike’s wife shrewdly would not let her husband sell. He is now selling it off at \$1,000 an acre, and his royalties yield him \$200 a week.”

The writer of this article is employing what is known as slanted writing, meaning that he purposefully puts a spin on his text with disregard for the facts. His object is aimed at his perceived audience, in this case bigoted and prejudiced people. From about the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Irish began to emigrate from their homeland, it was considered very funny to portray all Irishmen as drunken, slothful and lazy. These characteristics do not belong to the Irish any more than they apply to any other ethnic group. There are newspaper accounts in “the Winsted Mountain Journal” as well as the later “Winsted Evening Citizen” written with the same slant. In almost every case, the Irish and/or the Catholic Church are held up to ridicule in articles that appear in these papers. The same was true of women during the early years of the twentieth century when they were campaigning for equal rights. The reporters (and obviously with their editor’s approval) made statements about women’s meetings that today would be met with outright amazement and anger. I recall one that said the meeting conducted last night by a certain woman’s group was an amazing thing to behold; it was conducted just as though a man ran it. The reporter speculated that in another two or three generations women everywhere would also be able to conduct meetings as well as men. We may not be perfect, but we have come a long way in the past century and a half when it comes to newspaper reporting.

While it is interesting to read about the beginnings of the petroleum industry in this country, it would have left a better taste in our mouths if the reporter had stuck to the facts and left his personal prejudices at home.

Historic Bytes

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