

The Valley that Changed the World

By Mari Ito

Oil Creek, Pennsylvania is sometimes called “The Valley that Changed the World”, because that's where the PA Oil Boom began in 1859. It was the first oil boom in the world! There is a very interesting story of how it all started: George H. Bissell figured out that there could be oil in Oil Creek. Then his friend, Samuel M. Kier, figured out that you could burn oil. Mr. Bissell hired a man named Edwin L. Drake to go to Oil Creek and prospect for oil. When Drake arrived in Oil Creek, he got a letter addressed to “Colonel” Edwin L. Drake, and the name stuck. He was serious, a good businessman, and focused on what he was doing. Tragically, Drake almost went bankrupt... but then he struck oil only 69 ½ feet down. That was lucky, because usually you have to drill much farther down to strike oil. As time went on, what the people in Oil Creek did and used for getting more oil got better and better, and therefore helped Pennsylvania's economy and the Oil Industry.

Some tools the people in Oil Creek used and invented were pretty creative. The Drake cable tools were invented in 1859, and they could only drill three feet a day. But they did drill a well, and that same well set off the Pennsylvania Oil Boom. The spring pole is a big pole bashed into the ground. It also could only drill three feet a day. In 1877, the central power was invented. It is a big pump that lives in a pumphouse, and it could pump 2-50 different wells at the same time. Air and vacuum recoveries, invented in the 1860's were used to get any leftover oil out of wells. Drilling on hillsides and “wildcatting” (drilling on unknown territory) were both risky, but sometimes paid off.

A lot of people ran into problems. A local newspaper said that the roads were “wholly unclassable, almost impassable, scarcely jackassable.” (Petroleum Centre Exhibit). Mud veins were a very big problem. They were underground streams of mud that would gush up while people were drilling, and cover the tools. If the mud hardened, the tools would be stuck. So people invented tools to get them unstuck. There were also problems with oil. Sometimes when you hit an oil vein, it would gush up so

quickly that you couldn't contain it. So workers would dig trenches to guide the oil. There were also wells that gave five or less barrels a day, so workers had to do the same work for little oil. So they came up with a solution: let the well sit and get "a head", then pump it all at once.

There were many creative kinds of transportation (for oil or people or both). The first bridge across Oil Creek was built in 1865 and is called "The Toll Bridge", and you can still see it today . The "horse train" was a group of horses that took oil from the Benninghoff farm. It was later burnt down. Pipelines would take oil from farms to refineries. Teamsters would also take wagons of oil to refineries. This was very expensive because often the wagons would get stuck in the mud. The train was much less expensive, but it was only built later on. "Pond freshets" were like dams that could move up and down. When the pond freshets were taken up, the water would rush down the creek and raise the water 20-30 inches. There were 17 pond freshets along the 17- mile Oil Creek. They could help move about 150-200 barges and 30,000 barrels of oil. There was a lot of mayhem, and only about a 1/3 of the oil got to the refinery.

The people in Oil Creek were very creative, and invented a lot of things to deal with problems. Even so, I wouldn't like to live there. There were so many problems they didn't deal with, like fires and floods, anger and stealing, pollution and loss of oil, ungodliness and death. I think it must have been very hard to live there. "When California 49ers came into the valley they claimed conditions here were crazier than they'd ever seen." (Gidden) But a lot of good inventions to get oil came out of Oil Creek, so then it helped the Oil Industry and economy. I agree that it most definitely was "The Valley that Changed the World".

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Signs at the Oil Creek Benninghoff Farm Tableau

Signs at the Oil Creek Drake Well and Hunt Farm Historic Site

Signs along the Petroleum Centre Interpretive Walk

Signs along the Oil Creek Bicycle Trail

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