

OIL MAKES CLAY CITY BOOM IN 1937

Oil has been known and used since the beginning of recorded history.

Roman writers mention its use in building construction and warfare. Indians used it as a medicine and snake oil pitchmen extolled its medicinal qualities and sold it as a cure-all elixir. Oil comes from the ongoing fermentation of prehistoric fossil remains. Its value to lamp lighters, engine builders, and medicine men helped coin the descriptive synonym "liquid gold". In 1937, oil made Clay city a boom town.

Years earlier, promoters and speculators had looked for oil in southern Illinois. John Allen in *LEGENDS & LORE OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS* recounts attempts of speculators to drill on the western outskirts of Mt. Carmel in 1862 and 1866.

No oil was found in the vicinity of Mt. Carmel until 1940, three years after the Clay City oil strike.

Early 1900 issues of the *Flora News-Record* mention 200 oil wells in Lawrence County producing 15,000 barrels a day.

Events happened rapid-fire after the Clay County strike in 1937. The same paper makes a breathless read as the first headlines trumpet the find.

FIRST PRODUCING OIL WELL IN CLAY COUNTY reads the March 1st headline and the story below the blaring headline tells that drillers for Pure Oil Company (which later became Union Oil Company) found oil between 2600 and 2700 feet on the Eugene Weiler farm in south Clay County township.

The story continues that during the previous year the University of Illinois had made public a geological survey showing that Flora and Clay County were in the center of a prospective oil field. By the following Thursday, the paper reported that oil had now been struck at the Bradley well east of Cisne and

that the Weiler site tested high grade paraffin oil. Also, at the Weiler site, on that same Thursday, less than a week after the strike, tubing was in place and estimates were placed that from 40 to 125 barrels a day could be the output from the Weiler well. The current price of oil then was reported at \$1.35 per barrel.

Weiler's royalties were listed as \$500 per month for a ten to fifteen year lease on one well. As this was reported presumably to show the big money in oil in 1937.

"Excitement in Clay City is at a peak," newspaper reports continue. "Cafes, restaurants, rooming houses are hard pressed to care for the people the boom has brought in. A considerable amount of land has been transferred or leased."

By Friday, only six days after the strike, the breathless reporting reveals that pumping at the Weiler well has started "veiled in secrecy" and that "it is impossible to get definite statements from those in charge." The following Monday, a third strike hit the news, five holding tanks had been placed on the Weiler farm and rumors of 15 barrels of oil per hour were passed in Clay City.

The next day, little over a week after the find, a carload of oil tanks arrived on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad and by march 15 a pipeline had been laid from the Weiler well the the railroad line. The Cisne well "continued looking good" the paper reported.

On March 16 three new locations were announced by the Pure Oil Company for drilling and two days later three new companies reported their intentions to start drilling six new test wells: Carter Company 3 wells; Texas Company 2 wells; and Gulf Company one well. Independent operators continued to stream into town.

March 25 the headline read *ENTHUSIASM ON OIL PROSPECTS AT HIGH PITCH.*

By the end of April, 1937, the local newspaper showed pictures of townspeople admiring the 84-foot derrick at the Weiler strike; another shows Mayor Elmer Easley and quotes him as saying the oil boom will be used by Clay City to modernize the town and build a new hotel. A smiling picture of Marie Weiler, wife of the owner of the farm where oil was found,

reveals, "The family hopes oil will yield a moderate fortune."

In the same article, leases were reported signed on more than 250,000 acres in the area and a picture of downtown Clay City is captioned, "The town is filling up with prospectors, drillers, mechanics, and others who seek to reap a harvest in oil."

Richard Rudy was only a baby when his father followed the oil boom to Clay City from Oklahoma. "Dad was in the tank cleaning business and expanded into hauling iron for supply rigs."

Old-timers remember the downtown streets of Clay City perpetually covered with mud that was constantly tracked in from the fields. Sunday was the day to go visit the oil rigs and the Sunday afternoon ride invariably led to the oil field where the spectators could stand and look but only at a considerable distance.

Housing sprang up around Clay City. Rudy remembers the numbers of taverns and cafes and long lines to get in restaurants. The barber shop had a bathtub so a roughneck could get cleaned up. Many lived in garages or rented rooms and, with money to spend, boom town became wild town.

In the 50's, a number of supply houses lined the streets; now there are two.

Oil prices have gone up and down over the years. During the shortage in the '70's, when those gas lines sprang up everywhere, the price for crude skyrocketed to over \$30 a barrel. Last winter, Rudy remembers, it ranged from \$12 to \$13 a barrel. One can make a living at \$17 a barrel; \$20 to \$22 would be great.

"We're strictly at the mercy of OPEC and they can produce it cheaper than we can," he said.

Producing wells still do the landscape of Clay County. But a quick tour shows many rigs and storage tanks idle.

If, in Clay City, the past is indeed prologue, wait until the next boom.