

OIL INDUSTRY IN CRAWFORD COUNTY

Many acres were leased in Crawford County when our neighbors to the north in Clark County organized a company and drilled a well in 1865. In emulation, Robert Ames of Crawford County, drilled in Oblong Township on the McLain Farm using the spring pole technique and reached a depth of 300 feet. After using all his financial resources and providing entertainment for the local wits this first attempt to find oil in the county ended. Ironically, after the oil boom started in Illinois in the early 1900's sixteen oil wells were established on the same farm and the Ohio Oil Company had located a tank farm there in 1909.

In 1884 the Cresswell brothers, in trying to drill a water well on their farm southeast of Robinson, brought in a 25 pound to the square inch gas well at 182 feet. They piped it to the farm house for use in lighting and heating for the next 75 years.

Judge William C. Jones of the county, with others, organized the Crawford County Oil, Gas and Coal Company with \$5,000.00, in capital stock in 1901. This company and a Palestine company, in the eastern part of the county, between them drilled 5 wells and spent \$23,000.00. All the wells showed some oil, gas, or both. Gas from one of the Palestine wells was piped into town and forty stoves received the service making Palestine the first town in Crawford to be so served.

Judge Jones, thought that lack of experience, was one main reason neither company was successful and cited the following story to prove this point. The Palestine Company, using a standard rig, drilled to oil-bearing rock at about 850 feet, cased the well, and then shot it with nitro-glycerine. Both the casing and the well being thereby ruined with nothing to show for their work and expense.

J. J. Hoblitzell went to Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1905 to interest Joe Trees and Mike Benedum, the "Great Wildcatter", in some wells - mostly gas, he was developing in Clark County, Illinois. Using "creekology", the study of rock formations in creek beds, the two determined that the trend ran from northwest to southeast in Illinois rather than northeast to southwest as had been true in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. That made Crawford County

look interesting. Just about then they met a man in the hotel in Casey. Later they could not remember his name, but he told them of Judge Jones and the wells drilled three and four years before. The next day, with sand samples from Hoblitzell's well, they traveled by team and buggy to Crawford County. They talked to Jones, looked at the wells, compared sand samples, and determined to make the effort. Trees remained in Crawford to lease likely ground and Benedum returned east to raise needed capital. July, 1905, found them on the Robert Athey farm northwest of Robinson in Prairie Township. The drill bit struck pay sand on August 5, 1905 at 930 feet! When the tools were pulled, oil shot thirty or forty feet in the air. However, it was primarily a gas well which provided gas for nearby Annapolis, the second town in the county to get gas.

Interest was growing and leasing was being done at an ever faster pace but many still felt it was much to do about little. Editor George Harper of the Robinson Argus in reporting this and other drilling seemed more interested in the coal veins being drilled through than in the oil and gas. The ceremony starting a shaft coal mine at Flat Rock in September of 1905 received much more attention and enthusiasm in his paper. It was not until the February 7, 1906 issue that Editor Harper began to pay excited attention to oil with the announcement of the Shire gusher.

The Shire #1 is considered the discovery well of the Crawford County field as it became an oil producer. This well struck pay sand on February 2, 1906 in Sec. 15-T6N-R13W or two miles south of Stoy and one-quarter mile west of the crossroads which would become known as Oil Center. The 914 feet well flowed between 25 and 35 barrels a day and when shot about 3 months later it came in at almost 2500 barrels a day! Reportedly, DeWitt Finley of the Mahutska Oil Company, who brought in the Shire #1, delayed the shot until he was able to sign additional leases in the area.

This well was followed two months later by another big producer, Birch #1, one-quarter mile east of the Shire. Later that same year a well on Dr. Leroy Newlen's farm one mile north of Hardinville came in at 8,000 barrels a day.

The County had taken on the typical characteristics of an oil boom area; rapid population growth as the oil Johnnies poured in, tent camps, speculators, investors, and sleeping men on the court house lawn. As well as churned mud rods, high prices, business growth and hundreds of work teams and wagons going out each day from the distribution points of Oblong, Stoy, and Robinson along the Indianapolis Southern (part of Illinois Central's system) and the Big Four railroads. Everything moved at a rapid pace and didn't always keep pace as evidenced by an Oblong driller, George Whiston (the first), telling of bringing in a flowing well on the Drake farm and when he asked the producer what he was going to do the reply was "Get a lease on the farm quick."

Some of the earlier oil companies were Mahutska, Minnetonka, Crescent, Daisy, Riddle, Red Bank, Treat Crawford and Treat, Tidewater, Pure, Superior, and Ohio Oil Company.

When Ohio started in this field it was still a subsidiary of Standard Oil. Ohio bought and expanded pipelines and, by the end of 1906, had linked 791 producing wells which they also had purchased. By 1911, the Ohio was totally independent of Standard and two-thirds of its production came from the Illinois field which consisted of Clark, Crawford and Lawrence Counties.

The Ohio was concerned first with the purchase and transportation of crude oil and next with production. It was not until 1924 that they went into refining with the purchase of a small "batch operation" 750 barrel per day refinery in Robinson. It had started as the Robinson Oil Refinery in 1906, then the Wabash Refining Company, and finally the Lincoln Oil and Refining Company from whom the Ohio bought it. It was converted to continuous operation by 1925 and has continued to grow to this day. The refinery covers nearly 1000 acres, employs about 575 people, and is rated at a crude refining capacity of 195,000 barrels a day. Today only about 15% of its crude oil is provided by the Illinois basin. The name of the Ohio Oil Company, still headquartered in Findlay, Ohio was changed to the Marathon Oil Company in 1962.

Presently, Crawford is still among the leading Illinois

counties in new wells drilled every month. Many oil workers are third and fourth generation oil men. The April, 1995 county phone book still shows nine oil production companies in the yellow pages. They are BP Robinson, Bell Brothers, Crete Oil Company, Great Southwest Oil and Gas Corporation, Larrabee Oil Company, Maverick Energy, L. C. Neely Drilling, Inc., Ross Oil Company, and Western Oil and Gas Development Company. In addition there are other listings under Oil Field Services and Oil Well Drilling, as well as, many independent owners who operate a few wells. Not the least interesting of oil businesses is the Bradford Supply Company which has been here from the early days of oil and coming from Bradford, Pennsylvania, in the midst of the United States' first oil field. Altogether the oil industry is alive and well in Crawford County in 1995 going on ninety years after the discovery well - Shire #1.



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