

HISTORY OF OIL PRODUCTION IN WAYNE COUNTY AS NARRATED BY DON LAWHEAD FOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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There was an oil boom in Illinois in 1905 to approximately 1910 which centered around the area north of Lawrenceville, IL. This was quite a rapid development of that area as some very good production was found at shallow depths, ranging from 800 to 2000 feet.

The oil development in the middle and southwestern part of Illinois - it started with the discovery of oil about a 1 1/2 miles southeast of Cisne by the Pure Oil Company in early 1937. The real oil play as we know it in this area and on to the west and north, was actually started in 1936 when Pure Oil Company turned loose dozens of capable lease and land men and leased almost solid all of the land from Fairfield north on north of Clay City and almost up to Newton. The action of the Pure Oil Company putting out lease men triggered the land departments of the Texas Company and Carter Oil.

While Pure was leasing the biggest part of Wayne county and Clay County, Carter was leasing frantically all of the Fayette-Louden area in central Illinois. The Fayette-Louden area turned out to be the real cream of the crop of all of the oil developments in Illinois.

While this was going on, the Texas Company had their land men busy between Salem and Centralia.

Weinert's Big Well

The two first wells drilled in the immediate Fairfield area were drilled by Homer Soan, a promoter from Oklahoma and Texas, on the old Phillip Walker farm in the Pond Creek area north and slightly east of Bt. Prairie.

The other well drilled at this time was drilled by H. H. Weinert on the Dr. Hal Morland land south of Boyleston. The south Boyleston field was a very rich deposit of the oil. The sands included the Warsaw formation which lies about a thousand feet below the McClosky. The south Boyleston field has produced

millions and millions of barrels of oil and has made lots of profits for all the operators, the land and royalty owners.

Nick Duncan Came

One of the early pioneers in the Wayne county area and who located his headquarters in Fairfield was N.V. Duncan, favorably and lovably known as Nick. Nick was a big man, both in stature and in mentality and generosity. Nick was raised in north central Illinois and the Duncan family had a long history of interest in banking and insurance and in the affairs of the Catholic church. They hoped Nick would become a priest and pursue church work as his life's career. However, Nick was a rugged individualist and his leanings were for activity where brawn and muscle and courage and guts were the essential ingredients. So he started in the road construction business. Rains and the storms delayed his roadwork and caused him to lose a lot of time and lose money and almost to lose heart. From Illinois, he moved to Louisiana where Governor Hughey Long was taxing the devil out of the big oil companies to get the people of Louisiana out of the mud. I had first met Hughey Long in a boarding house in Norman, OK., in the fall of 1910. I had a 8 x 8 size bedroom at this boarding house and the privilege of eating two meals a day at a big table loaded with food for the sum of \$2.75 a week.

Hughey Long couldn't afford \$2.75 a week, so he had a room next to mine, 8 x 8, and he only ate one meal a day and the cost to him was \$2.25 a week.

The reason that Nick Duncan started in the oil producing and oil drilling business, he said, was due to the fact that it rained so much and the roads and the ground got muddy and he lost so much time in road building. A rotary drilling outfit was going 24 hours a day and earning money.

About the time of this decision, the Cisne well by Pure Oil Company came in and the oil boom started in southern Illinois. He also heard from his brother, Walter Duncan, who had come down from Pontiac, IL, and had opened offices in Mt. Vernon, IL, and was investing money right and left in buying leases and royalty in this area.

Nick came to Fairfield to look the situation over. In late September of 1938, I met Nick for the first time in the Homer Sloan office. He was wanting to know what I thought of the town - whether it would be a good location for his headquarters. He sold his road machinery and made a substantial

payment on a rotary rig. He had also taken in partners with him as the operators of the field work the senior Mark Keoughan. (Father of Jack and Frank.)

Carl Robinson Arrived

Their first drilling contract was on a lease south of Clay City, IL. A tract of land which Pure had tried to lease but were unable to lease due to a stubborn landowner and he had made a deal with independent traders and leased them the land. They, in turn, interested the man who had accumulated a lot of money at, I believe, Columbus, Ohio, selling seat covers for both Model T and Model A Fords. So, Nick had the contract to drill the first contract on this tract and the man who was superintendent and looking after the interest of the seat cover man was Carl Robinson, Sr. (Father of Robert H. Robinson, of Fairfield.)

At that time, he had been sent out here to look after the seat cover man's interest and was being paid, as I remember, about \$225.00 or \$250.00 a month.

The well was drilled and they hit oil. At the time that Nick was drilling this well, although he had assets, he was just a little short on cash for his payroll for several weeks and some of his drillers and roughnecks had to hold his checks till he could scrooge up enough money to cover the checks.

This was his start and from then on, Nick kept developing and hitting oil here. He later was operating a total of five rotary rigs. When he died of pneumonia and heart trouble and a good strenuous life of activity, he was worth somewhere between a million and two million.

Then Carl Robinson decided to make his headquarters in Fairfield and he came to this town and looked for different oil ventures of various kinds but without any great success. According to one of his family, he was pretty much on the idea of moving back to Columbus, Ohio. However, H. H. Weinert had more good properties than he could look after. He had a

block of approximately 3,000 acres in the Barnhill section down along the old Bt. Prairie road on which there was a pretty good looking seismograph picture.

B. Earl Puckett Helped

So, without any strings attached, as far as I know no money changing hands, he turned a 3,000 Barnhill tract over to Carl Robinson. Carl knew what to do with it. Meanwhile, he had contacted B. Earl Puckett, a Barnhill boy who had gone from Fairfield back east to become chairman and a big owner of the stock in the Allied stores and had amassed himself four or five million dollars.

He had an interest in the Fairfield and Wayne County area. He owned land here and at one time had been an employee of the Fairfield National Bank at \$50.00 a month. So, he and Carl Robinson got their heads together and took on a block of 3,000 acres. The oil business is quite risky and although Mr. Puckett had a lot of money and Mr. Robinson at that time did not have, they decided to sell interest in this thousand acres. Mr. Robinson did this to investors in the Champaign area. While he was selling these units he also was working on a pet project which he had been nurturing for many years.

He had in mind that he should write and did write, although I don't think it was ever published, his interpretation of the Bible. This part of Mr. Robinson's acts was known to very few people. However, he was very sincere and made a long study of how he thought the Bible should be interpreted.

Carl Robinson returned to Fairfield and made a drilling contract with a man named Chisolm who was an old rough burly rotary drill man. This well hit in the Barnhill field and spread every direction.

From that day on, Robinson and Puckett became widespread oil operators, and both prospered greatly. In fact, the husband of our chairman here of the Historical Society, Mr. Bernard Podolsky, was recruited by Mr. Robinson and came here from Olney, and took a job as geologist for Carl Robinson and learned this area thoroughly and since has been very successful as an oil operator and producer in all the southern Illinois area.

Terry Jenkins Shows Up

One of our active operators in the Fairfield area from the very beginning of the oil development of H. H. Weinert was Terry Jenkins, who came up from Texas to

be the superintendent of production for Weinert on the Morland lease. Terry also was a very able man at stud and draw poker. And during the early war years of '40 to '44 there was some highly interesting and highly profitable sessions for some of them at both stud and draw poker in the Elks Club.

Well, Mr. Jenkins had learned the poker business in Texas and was very adept at it. Besides his good salary from Weinert, he also accumulated quite a little cash money for his own account and for his own investments in deals that might have come up.

Martin Caldwell Here

About this time, Martin Caldwell who had been an employee of the Texas Company for a number of years, moved to Fairfield and was still employed by the Texas Company as a gauger for the Texas Pipeline Department. Mr. Caldwell ran into what he thought was a good buy in the north end of the Johnsonville field.

Cullum and Lawhead

At that time, I was a partner with George Cullum and we operated as Cullum-Lawhead and we heard that due to the objection of the Texas Company, Mr. Caldwell had to sell this property. Mr. Cullum appraised the equipment and three wells on it at about \$12,000 and that was about what we offered Mr. Caldwell for this 80-acre lease and three wells.

However, we were penny-wise and proud foolish. We tried to buy it too cheap. The next thing I knew Terry Jenkins had bought it for about \$14,000 or \$15,000. He didn't know any more about the future of this lease than we did. It had 7 or 8 barrels a day of daily production. Terry plugged out the two wells, sold all the equipment, and got back \$10,000 - \$11,000 of his capital, but he had one well he figured he better keep pumping in order to hold the lease that something might happen. Well, his hunch on that was like figuring he might draw another ace or two in playing poker. It turned out to be that his hunch was correct and in the course of a few years, due to the migration of oil from here to there underground, this one lease went from a matter of 2 or 3 barrels a day up to 300 and 400 and 500 barrels a day and of course this was all virtually clear profit.

Before the lease was finally petered out and abandoned, it probably made him somewhere around \$500,000 to

\$600,000 in clear profit. With this money he bought a 15,000 - 20,000 acre ranch in Wyoming and lots of good thoroughbred cattle and did what he'd been wanting to do all his life - that is to raise cattle in the west on a lot of land.

Johnny Carter Hits

Another instance of luck was my old friend Johnny Carter. Johnny Carter had been a truck driver for Big Boy Watkins, one of our local rotary drilling contractors who came up here from Oklahoma City.

When Mr. Watkins moved his rig up here and started active drilling, Carter came up here and started on his own as a rod-tubing well serving company. He worked at this a few years and got the lay of the land here and began to see opportunities where he might produce some oil. He made a partnership with a man named Tuley who had some money and a lot of good land in the corn belt right east of Carmi, IL, and they then started out as Tuley & Carter. They bought two rigs and did their own drilling.

They developed some of the best production in Jasper township northeast of Fairfield, drilling upon the Robinson and the Crews and other leases drilling 14 to 15 straight producing wells all of which were commercial and profitable.

After operating successfully in both southern Illinois and southern Indiana, Tuley & Carter dissolved.

In the meanwhile, a big oil boom had hit on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains and eastern Colorado. Mr. Carter, a man who believed in quick action, fast action and in a few trades I had with him, he could make up his mind - say yes or no, faster than anybody I ever tried to trade with and was a man of his word.

So the lure of what was considered the bigger oil wells, caused him to sell his home in Fairfield, sell his interest in the Independent Oil Well Cementing Company and moved to Denver, CO. At the time he left I would say Carter had at least a half million dollars in money and property.

After reaching Denver, where he had shipped one of his rotary rigs, he bought another new rotary rig, costing in the neighborhood of a quarter of a million dollars, and he

jumped into the new play in northeastern Colorado.

The entire production, in place of being what it looked like, was like a mirage that you see when you drive on the hot plains around Amarillo, Texas, and Carter lost the half million dollars he made in Illinois and he was in debt a couple hundred thousand. He came back to Illinois and managed to get hold of a rig, but his luck had started running against him and he never did recoup. He's now been in Oklahoma City for the past few years and has been doing very well as a land man, and dealer in producing property.

Alva Davis Sells

In fact, he was instrumental in finding Alva Davis a buyer for his Skiles Oil Company which Mr. Davis, who had been operating as the Davis Drilling Company, had acquired about 10 to 11 years ago with the assistance of two big investors in the Boston area.

Mr. Davis had worked as a drilling contractor and oil producer and a few years ago, he decided it was time to slow down and do more crappie and bass fishing. I tried to sell his properties to a refinery up in Michigan, but they were intrigued at the time with trying to get oil out of Iran.

Anyhow, Johnny Carter found a company that was interested in the Skiles oil properties. So, about a little over a year ago, this sale was consummated and Mr. Davis came out with a nice bunch of money and now all he has to do is look out at Barkley Lake or ride around in his boat on Barkley Lake, fishing for bass and crappie and then when he's back in the house, all he has to do is count his money.

Sam Tipps Role

I should mention that Sam Tipps was one of the early operators in this area. He came up from east Texas but he didn't bring just his pants in his bare hands. He had a well servicing outfit-rods-tubing machine and he made his original headquarters in Flora, IL. For a while here in Southern Illinois, Sam was about the only man you could call to get a rod and tubing job as any of the other operators of this type of service were either located up around Centralia or over around Grayville or Crossville.

From this oil start, Sam went on to other lines of service - production.

He didn't believe too much in geology, he believed in the line of geology which is considered the best geology in the oil business - that is proximity. Whenever anybody would hit a new oil well or start a new oilfield, Sam Tipps was smart enough to jump in if he could find a 20 or a 40 or 80 acres anywhere near the new oilwell, he'd buy it and hang on to it. This kind of geology proved very profitable for him and as a result he's developed a lot of production of his own. As a result, about all he has to do now is just count his money and play golf and I'm sure that he's doing both of them very successfully.

In all of my contact with the oil business going back when I started as a newspaper reporter in Oklahoma in about 1912, I have learned that the competition in the oil business, among little operators and little producers, landmen and your big major companies, is terrific - it's competitive. When these demogogs and humbugs and would-be presidents in Washington talk about the conspiracy of the major companies to get-together to fix prices or buy leases or work together to the detriment of the consumer is all just plain outright lies and poppycock. They don't conspire - they don't need to. Every damn one of them is tough as a boot and they're out to show how much smarter they are than the other fellow. The same thing was true in the men that operated around here. Davis is an individual; Tipps is an individual; Nick Duncan was a rugged individualist; same way with Carl Robinson; same way with a lot of other men.

Ben Nation's Success

Now I want to come to one that you all know is a rugged individual - that's the story of Ben Nation who passed away here recently but was known from one end of this southern Illinois area to the other.

One of the most interesting people in the development of oil resources in Wayne and White county and the general southern Illinois area, was the late Ben Nation.

Ben Nation was an individualist with a capital I!

Ben Nation, after learning a lot of things to do and not to do in the real estate business in Chicago which is a rough school in the training of property, came back to Fairfield about 1939. He landed full of energy and determination. His first venture proved to be his most successful.

In the early part of '39 or early '38, a man named Davis had taken on a block of 3,000 or 4,000 acres of leases right south and a little west of Mill Shoals. Unfortunately, for

him, he drilled a test well on the east side of Highway 45 south of Mill Shoals. He missed an oilfield of considerable importance by about a half mile and wound up with a dry hole. He released the leases and returned them to the man who had put the lease block together.

Ben Nation arrived in Fairfield, he was lucky enough to get in touch with this man who had this block at Mill Shoals. This man also was a doodlebugger and sold Ben on the idea that the doodlebug showed that there was oil under the block, but that is was west of the highway.

The doodlebugger by coincidence was right. There was a seismograph high in the area which could be interpreted as being a good prospective well. The Texas Company had bought a long term lease on the 1,200 acres owned by A. J. Poorman, president of the Fairfield National Bank.

However, this did not slow down the prospects for Mr. Nation. He made a deal with the doodlebugger on the 3,000 acres and he also made a deal with some boys from Texas who had acquired 700 or 800 acres in the area and had made a location for a test well.

Ben Nation paid no attention to the so-called experts who condemned the area, and when his first well reached Aux Vases formation, he ran a drill stem test and the well started flowing clean oil with virtually no water. This created a tremendous excitement all through southern Illinois and the geologist and so-called experts decided to change their minds and from then on, the Aux Vases was one of the most lucrative oil zones in which to test and look for oil.

Ben's progress in the oil business was spectacular. In drilling his first well, he had put a small amount of acreage into a small syndicate and such men as L. A. Blackburn, Dave Garrison and a few other local people, had contributed and bought interest in this first well. They all of course profited from the splendid oil production which this well and other wells on the syndicate acreage developed.

Ben, of course, had other acreage in which he owned a 100

percent of the working interest and he developed this rapidly. After the development of the Mill Shoals field, they took on other ventures east of Bt. Prairie, and back all over the southern Illinois basin.

the fact that the doodlebugger had recommended this location to Ben, caused him to be a great believer in doodlebug operations for about 3 to 4 years. Once in a great while, he would find oil on a lease which the doodlebug said might produce, but in most cases, about 80 percent to 90 percent where the doodlebug said there would be oil, there wasn't any oil.

Ben, also did a great amount of good and constructive work in Wayne and White counties in the development and clearing of land. One time he told me he had a tractor that he bought from Caterpillar that cost him \$76,000, and he had his picture taken sitting up on the seat and he told further that he had one attachment that was \$18,000 to put on this \$76,000 tractor. Ben was an operator who didn't believe in doing small things or listening to the experts.

The first two wells in the immediate Fairfield area were drilled in the early part of 1938. One was drilled by Homer Sloan on the Phil Walker land in Pond Creek north and east of Bt. Prairie. The other well was drilled by H. H. Weinert, on the Morland land south of Boyleston.

Mr. Sloan's well was drilled by himself and a syndicate of investors from around Rock Island, IL, and was drilled to the McClosky and came in for approximately 100 to 150 barrels of oil a day after a light shot of acid. However, Mr. Weinert's well on the Morland lease came in a much bigger well - 600, 700, 800 or 1000 barrels.

Jack Chevigny Here

Weinert's lease was one of the best in all of southern Illinois. Weinert's acquisition of this lease was due to his flexibility and the trading ability of an ex-champion football player. Jack Chevigny had been one of the great stars of the football team from Notre Dame under Knute Ruckne. Then he entered the coaching business at the University of Texas at Austin. Here he met Weinert's daughter and they became very good friends and through this friendship, Mr. Weinert hired Jack who had studied as his geologist and land man and sent him up to

Illinois to look after his interests. By skillful dealing he got the valuable Morland lease for Mr. Weinert. Chevigny continued with Weinert for a few years till World War II broke out and he immediately volunteered for the Marines. He was killed at Okinawa as an officer in charge of the Marines in that Bloody conquest.

To give you an idea of how set the experts and geologist were about the Aux Vases formation not producing in southern Illinois, I can give you a small illustration of my own experience. I had know Mr. Sloan for a number of years and when he found oil on the Phil Walker lease in Pond Creek, he phoned me in Oklahoma City and asked me to come up here and help him out as he had considerable acreage and he needed some help in developing it.

Don Lawhead Arrives

I came to Illinois in September of 1938 in a Chevrolet worth about \$350 and \$50 in my pocket. However, I didn't owe any money. Sloan was anxious to drill another well after his Phil Walker well declined. We staked a location as a diagonal offset to the Phil Walker on the Carey Cox lease.

I made a trade with a couple of drilling contractors with a steam rig and virtually no money to drill a well on this property. I offered them \$8000 in cash and an eighth override to drill the well to the McClosky formation at approximately 3,400 feet. however, I was somewhat skeptical about the experts advice on the Aux Vases formation. So, when we got down to approximately 3,300 feet, I had Mr. Bell who was in charge of the actual drilling of the well, put on the core barrel and take 4 of the Aux Vases formation. The core and barrel recovered 20 full feet of formation. The upper 8 feet was still hard rock, but the lower 12 feet was rich, oily Aux Vases sand. After looking at the core and gathering some of the oil and oil sand in a half gallon milk bucket, Mr. Bell and I were both smiling. Well, he said have you ordered casing. I said no. Well, he says, "Hell. In Texas when we hit oil, we run pipe." I said, " Yes, but that's Texas. up here, the experts say that the Aux Vases formation will not produce oil because there's too much water in it." I said, "I'm not sure they're right but in order to play it safe and not stub my toe here, this is other people's money that is paying for this well, let's go on down to the McClosky." So we reamed out the hole and went on down to the McClosky and it proved to be very light;

however, the old O'Hara formation which is another formation around 3400 feet, had some oil in it and we put the Carey Cox well on production to start with from the O'Hara and then in later years, we knew exactly where the Aux Vases oil producing sand was and it was perforated there and produced a lot of good oil from the Aux Vases.

E. H. Crippen's Role

In the meanwhile, Ben Nation, at Mill Shoals, had proved the Aux Vases sand was good, highly productive in places of good commercial oil with virtually no water.

One of the most interesting developments in the Pond Creek area was by the New Penn Co. of which E. H. Crippen was the superintendent and general manager for a number of years. After the drilling of the Phil Walker well and the Carey Cox well, they started development on some of the 4,000 or 5,000 acres which they had taken on an override and a cash payment. New Penn developed a lot of production over the years and proved a successful and profitable investment for Mr. Crippen's brother and other investors located back in Pennsylvania.

J. W. Steele's Part

One of our most picturesque operators for a period of 15-20 years in this area was a man named J. W. Steele. Steele, in my opinion, had very little education; he may not have known how to actually read and write to any degree at all. He came up to the oil boom about 1937-38 from east Texas and got a job in northeastern Rinard pumping for the Pure Oil Company. At that time, I imagine he got a \$30-\$35 a week looking after a number of wells.

Steele saw an opportunity. Although he was not very well educated, he decided he should become an oil operator. So he talked to some of these people and went to some other landowners whose leases had lapsed or been turned back by the Pure Oil

Company and he started in as an oil operator. In the course of 15 or 20 years, he actually raised and brought into the Wayne county general area somewhere between a million and a half and two million dollars that expended in drilling and equipping wells.

In my opinion, he drilled about 50 or 60 producing wells and of course he had quite a number of dry holes.

Clacey Robbins Busy

There's another man who never wore out any high schools or colleges by his attendance, but he certainly knew how to read and write and he knew his arithmetic. He wasn't a man of this new mathematics but he knew the old arithmetic and he brought something new to the oil business in this area and to the oil business generally throughout the United States. He was the first man that I know of anywhere, and that includes Texas, Oklahoma, and all other oilfields that actually developed as a new plan the 25 year oil lease, a plan where he got 25 year leases for \$50 an acre.

In a lot of cases, this appealed to the landowners cause they needed the money. Actually, in 1937-38, there was a lot of land in Wayne and Clay county that was only selling for \$20-\$25 an acre and \$50 an acre for a 25 year lease and half of the royalties. This man was Clacey Robbins. In my 79 years of life, I never met a more likeable man; a fellow that is more pleasure to do business with.

Well Clacey then proceeded to take these royalties and he put these in syndicates and put half of the royalty on about 20-30-40 pieces of land into these syndicates.

Clacey Robbins did this in a number of instances and then after he syndicated this stuff, he decided a few years later to drill some wells. Then he drilled 7 or 8 wells out in Jasper township of which about six were producing, but the oil business was a little too slow for him and he told me that, "I can make more money and

faster and bigger trade deals in Black Angus cattle and land" and he sold all of his oil wells to Sam Tipps and proceeded then to go back in the land and Black Angus cattle business, and when he retired and went to Arkansas before his death, he had a lot of valuable land and a lot of valuable Angus cattle.

Since 1937 the oil development in Wayne county has brought a lot of money to everyone - farmers, royalty owners, bankers, merchants, oil operators, etc. The oil business is still continuing in this area. The new development in Jasper township at deeper depths will mean that the oil business in this area is a continuing and progressing business endeavor which is good for all concerned.

Congratulations on your 50th!

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