

NATIONAL REFINING COMPANY
#1, NELLIE JOHNSTONE
OKLAHOMA'S FIRST COMMERCIAL
OIL WELL.

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There's a certain amount of romance attached to Oklahoma's first oil well, located in Bartlesville's pretty little city park. This "Old Faithful" which is still producing about 1 barrel of liquid gold a day, is a monument to the oil industry of the state. Many comparatively poor people have awakened in the morning to find that they were made near-millionaires over night by the discovery of the precious fluid on their land.

The early oil days in Bartlesville remind one of the stories of the gold rush to California and to the Yukon in Alaska. Ordinary spots on a prairie grew up over night to bustling cities with the discovery of vast fields of oil in the vicinity.

Much credit is due George B. Keeler, William Johnstone, Frank M. Overlees and Dr. G. W. Woodring, prominent former citizens of Bartlesville, all now deceased.

Seeps of oil were prominently recognized on the Caney River banks and as early as 1875, George

Keeler had observed an oil seepage in the vicinity of the discovery well and came to the conclusion that petroleum deposits were to be found nearby, and during his spare time began negotiations to have the well drilled, arousing the interest of other citizens of the community in the plan.

Messrs. Keeler and Johnstone operated the first store in what is now Bartlesville and visioned a city rising in the locality and with other citizens felt that ^{if} oil could be found in the vicinity it would do much to speed the development of the city. None of the group were oil men, however, and they began to cast about in an effort to drill a test well.

They, with a crew of drillers from Independence, Kansas, selected a spot on the banks of the Caney River which they thought showed traces of being an oil spot. They contacted John F. Overfield, who at that time was a traveling salesman for a Chicago commercial firm. Mr. Overfield had heard of the oil possibilities through Mr. E. P. Galey of the

firm of Guffey & Galey, who had opened wells 15 miles north of Independence, Kansas, at Neodesha, and also built ^{small} refineries there and refined his own oil.

Galey's suggestion was made after taking a ride in his rickety dish-wheeled buggy from Neodesha southwest to Bartlesville. He drove southwest, following a line of small mounds, such as the one that is northwest of Bartlesville, all the way until he reached Bartlesville. These mounds were from one to two miles distance and were formed, according to Galey, by natural gas which had raised them. He suggested to the few pioneers who were here at the time, that oil might be found under the land upon which the settlers were located. He based his decision upon the fact that this line of small, smooth topped mounds were in a direct line and because he had found simular rocks on each of these mounds. The rocks were rough edged and broken off.

It was finally agreed that if Keeler would go to Tahlequah, then the capital of the Cherokee Nation, and get a lease on the land, Galey would

come down and open up the field and drill the first well.

Keeler, with William Johnstone, Frank Overlees and a few others, thirteen in all, went to Tahlequah and secured their lease covering the rights of drilling for oil and gas, after much delay. This lease covered a tract of land 15 miles square, having as its west boundary the 96th meridian. It was learned later that these leases lacked an official signature - without which they were incomplete. It took some time in getting the matter straightened up and the leases officially signed, consequently delaying the drilling of the first well. However, in July, 1893, the lease was obtained with the proper signature but nothing further was done until the early part of 1897.

After so much delay in securing the proper signature, much time had been lost and by this time Guffey and Gale had sold their interest in the Forest Oil Company, which later became the Prairie Oil and Gas Company. The Forest Company

was not at that time interested in drilling for oil in the Indian Territory.

Mr. Overfield then induced the Cudahy Oil Company to drill a well on the property, and the lease, which had originally been granted in the name of John F. Overfield, was assigned to the Cudahy Oil Company and Mr. Keeler made a contract with the Cudahy to drill and test out Keeler's lease in the City Park along the banks of Janey River. Mr. Overfield then became manager of the Cudahy's operations in that area, and had supervision of the drilling of Oklahoma's 'first commercial oil well.'

The next problem was to locate a rig to drill the well. In 1896, the Cudahy Oil Company had taken over and deepened a well between Red Fork and Sapulpa, that had been drilled to 1,300 feet for the firm of Steelsmith & Weaver, which they had abandoned at about 1,750 feet in December, 1896. The drilling contractors on this well were McBride & Bloom of Independence, Kansas and the Cudahy Oil Company contracted with them to drill the Bartles-

ville well. The rig was torn down and moved about 70 miles overland to Bartlesville in January, 1897. The hauling was done by George Keeler and required about two week's time.

Drilling was started late in January, 1897, and according to the drilling records, the well found the Oswego lime at 880 to 948 feet, the Layton sand at 975 to 987 feet, a gas at 1252 to 1257 feet and at 1303 feet encountered oil in a sand later to be called "Bartlesville sand." It was drilled to 1320 feet, and when it showed for an oil well, was shot with glycerin.

Mrs. Jennie O. Morton, step daughter of Mr. Keeler and wife of A. D. Morton, who now resides in Los Angeles, California, dropped the "go-devil" that exploded the shot into the first oil well in the Cherokee Nation. The well shot many feet over the derrick and the black liquid gold which has made millionaires of many, flowed out on the river banks and down the stream.

The well was completed by the drilling contractors,

McBride & Bloom, on April 15, 1897. The work of these early days was handicapped by the fact that there were no railroad facilities or pipelines to transport the oil, so the well was capped for the next two years. Despite the cap, oil seeped out the sides of the casing and flowed into the river and at times, it was estimated to be producing 150 barrels of oil per day.

During the time the well was being drilled, many of the Cherokee tribesmen had protested the granting of so large a lease. The matter eventually came up for the consideration of congress, and upon the passage of the Curtis bill in 1898, lease holders were forced to surrender all

'unimproved lands,' lessee-operators being allowed to hold only 640 acres for each producing well. The Cudahy Oil Company selected Section 12, township 26 north, range 12 east, on which the discovery well was located, and a new lease for a period of 15 years covering this section was executed by the Department of Interior, being finally approved on August 7, 1902. (Shortly

before the expiration of this lease, ^{on} April 23, 1917, Mrs. Nellie V. Cannon, nee Johnstone, executed a new lease to the Cudahy Oil Company.)

Meanwhile the government had been going ahead with plans to allot the Cherokee tribal lands to the members of the tribe. William Johnstone had filed on the land, on which the discovery well was located, for his daughter, Nellie V. Johnstone, now Mrs. Howard Cannon of Bartlesville. On July 21, 1903, the certificate of allotment giving her title to the land was issued.

With lease and land ownership settled, the Cudahy Oil company was able to go ahead with the development of the lease. In August, 1903, the pioneer well was cleaned out, deepened to 1345 feet, given a shot of glycerin, and again brought on production. The production averaged about 30 barrels of 29 gravity oil per day. Until December, 1904, at which time the Prairie Oil and Gas Company completed a pipeline into the Bartlesville oil area, the oil from the well was transported by railway

tank cars to a refinery at Neodesha, Kansas.

In 1907, the National Refining Company of Cleveland, Ohio, acquired the Cudahy Oil Company and since that time has owned the pioneer 'oiler.' For many years, the lease upon which the pioneer well was located was operated by the National Refining Company, under the name of the Cudahy Oil Company, but since 1934, the lease has been operated directly by the National Refining Company.

The well continued to produce consistently, but in 1932 it was discovered that it had ceased to make any oil, and was standing full of water. On examination of the well, it was found that the old string of 6 1-4 inch wrought-iron casing was badly pitted and corroded, and permitted water from a shallow stratum to come in and out of the oil. A new string of 4 7-8 inch casing was run into the hole, inside the old string, and the water was shut off. The well was then started on production at the rate of over 1 1-2 barrels per day, and soon settled down to a basis of approximately one barrel per day.

After forty years of its discovery this well is producing 3-4 barrel of oil per day. It is estimated that the well had produced in excess of 100,000 barrels of crude oil.

Of the individuals who were originally interested in the well or took part in its drilling only one of the drilling contractors, A. P. McBride, is still living. He resides at Independence, Kansas. C. L. Bloom, the other contractor who helped in this great adventure, passed away in Independence about three months ago.

The land on which Oklahoma's 'first commercial oil well' is located is now owned by the city of Bartlesville, having been purchased from Mrs. Howard Cannon for park purposes in 1917. Mrs. Cannon, however, retained the oil and mineral rights. The contract of sale to the city of Bartlesville specified that the park should be named "JOHNSTONE PARK" in honor of Mrs. Cannon's father, William Johnstone, who was one of the leaders of the small pioneer group instrumental

in obtaining the first commercial development of crude petroleum in what is now the state of Oklahoma.

A granite boulder marks the site of the first commercial oil well drilled in Oklahoma.

On the marker the following inscription appears:

"THE FIRST COMMERCIAL OIL WELL IN OKLAHOMA.

COMPLETED APRIL 15, 1897. This marker was dedicated

October 20, 1937, and presented to the Oklahoma

Historical Society, by Mayor J.R. Daugherty of

Bartlesville, and accepted by Mr. Meserve, one

of the directors of the Oklahoma Historical

Society.