First Kansas Oil & Gas Wells

BY BRUCE WELLS
American Oil & Gas Historical Society Director

When America’s first commercial oil well was drilled in 1859 near oil seeps at Titusville, Pennsylvania, entrepreneurs began searching for oil seeps in other states. Refiners wanted the “rock oil” for a popular lamp fuel, kerosene. In 1860, George Brown, a newspaperman in Kansas Terri- tory, recalled stories about an oil spring in Lykens County (to- day Miami County). Brown, who had ar- rived a few years earlier from Pennsylvania, drilled shallow wells east of Paola.

Brown’s third well had reached about 100 feet deep in the Bap- tist Indian Mission grounds when it pro- duced a few barrels of oil. But the Civil War ended his quest.

Although other explora- tion companies returned after the war, it would be almost two decades before Kansas became an oil produc- ing state — thanks to a natural gas discovery. In 1882, the Kan- sas Oil and Mining Company drilled for oil seven miles east of Paola. Instead of oil, the well uncovered a gas field. By the mid-1880s, Paola was the first Kansas town to use natural gas com- mercially for illumina- tion.

As more drilling companies completed gas wells, Paola’s city council instructed its “light committee” to purchase 50 lamps to be erected on the main thoroughfaring. Flann- beaux arches also were erected to attract indus- tries from Kansas City.

“As Paola has the cheapest fuel in Kan- sas,” civic leaders de- clared in 1887 as new, gas-fueled flour mills and glass factories opened. But with lim- ited technologies and little understanding of conservation, Paola’s oil started to run dry.

Fortunately, another petroleum boom soon began in Kansas. About 110 miles southwest of Paola, on November 28, 1892, after 22 days of diffi- cult drilling, the Nor- man No. 1 well found oil in Neodesha in Wil- son County. The first commercial oil well in Kansas was completed in a garden plot belong- ing to T.J. Norman, a local blacksmith.

William Mills made the discovery along the banks of the Verdigris River. Since he had been drilling for natu- ral gas (near oil seeps) he temporarily capped well, which was about 830 feet deep.

Mills decided to take a sample of his oil to Pittsburgh, Penn- sylvania, and met with two experi- enced oilmen, John Galey and James Guffey. They became partners and together returned to Neodesha to “shoot” with 30 quarts of nitroglycerine that had been hauled (care- fully) by wagon from Webb City, Missouri.

Although it initially produced less than 12 barrels of oil a day, the Norman No. 1 well was the first to reveal America’s Mid-Conti- nent petroleum region. The Neodesha dis- covey attracted others willing to risk large amounts of money on exploration and infra- structure. Kansas refin- eries began turning oil into inexpensive kero- sene for lamps – and soon, gasoline for automo- biles.

In 1901, Guffey and Galey used their suc- cess in Kansas to pro- duce financial backing for the “Lucas Gusher” discovery well at Spin- deltop, Texas. Just one year earlier, the first U.S. auto show drew thousands to Madison Square Garden in New York City.

By 1904, Kansas was producing four million barrels of oil per year. In 1925, it was ranked fifth among the oil-producing states. A 1919 wildcat well in the southwestern part of the state discovered the massive Hugoton natural gas field that extended into Oklaho- ma and the Texas Pan- handle. That Seward County well remained capped for three years, because the company had been looking for oil. There were no pipelines for the gas. Abandoned in 1919, the Norman No. 1 wellsite along the Verdigris River was designated a U.S. Na- tional Landmark in 1977. The Norman No. 1 Museum (and R.V. park) includes a 65- foot replica derrick of the historic oil well.

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A 1960s image of the Neodesha Oil Museum with its replica Norman No. 1 derrick. Photo courtesy the museum, who moved to Main Street in 1989.

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Fortunately, another petroleum boom soon began in Kansas. About 110 miles southwest of Paola, on November 28, 1892, after 22 days of difficult drilling, the Norman No. 1 well found oil in Neodesha in Wilson County. The first commercial oil well in Kansas was completed in a garden plot belonging to T.J. Norman, a local blacksmith.

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