

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

Livermore Valley Oil Boom!

As early as 1899, men came to Livermore to scout for oil in the surrounding hills. Far from any established oil fields, the wells that they drilled were called “wildcat” wells, and the men who searched for them and drilled them were called “wildcatters.” The first well was drilled on the Brown ranch northeast of Livermore in December 1900. Livermore machinist John Aylward worked on the project, persuading ranchers to sign over land leases to the oil company. His son, Edward Aylward, a skilled mechanic, worked at his father’s machine shop on parts that could be brought to town for repair and also went out to the well to repair drilling machinery on location. Charles P. Lefever came from previous oil field experience in Pennsylvania, Colorado, Texas, and New Mexico to be the driller of the well. After drilling a second well, he retired and became Livermore’s town marshal in 1907, serving until his death in 1917.

The Independence well was drilled in the hills on the old Hamilton ranch east of Livermore on section 15; its 84-foot derrick was almost finished on 28 October 1911. The oil

company hauled supplies and fuel oil for the drilling machinery there in early December before the rainy season with a steam traction engine. They erected a tank, large enough to hold an entire winter’s supply of fuel on site. W.W. French, graduate of Harvard and a Boston attorney, came to Livermore in 1915 to provide more financial backing for the well and spent 20 years in the Livermore area promoting local oil fields. He died penniless at age 87 in 1935 at Fairmont Hospital in Oakland, having spent his fortune and those of his eastern friends without finding a gusher here. Various interests kept reviving the boring at the well, but ultimately only oily sand was found; in 1918 the rig burned down.

A well called the Daisy was drilled in 1908 half a mile east of Midway by W.J. Rhoads for the Tracy Oil Company, financed in large part by W.W. French. The Atlantic & Western Oil

Company, which took over after French’s company had reached 1,700 feet, renamed the well “French No. 1” in his honor and continued the well down to 3,150 feet, the deepest well bored, but still without success.

The Alisal well, also drilled on section 15, was probably closest to the heart of Livermore; a number of familiar Livermore names were on the company board, including merchants George Beck and H.P. Winegar and banker H.B. Varney. Livermore capital largely financed the development of the well. The Alisal also failed, but it was the only well which produced oil that was actually used. Its five barrels a day fired the Alisal boiler and the boiler of the nearby W.M. & S well. N.D. Dutcher and Sons Hardware in Livermore demonstrated the oil’s use in a cookstove at the store. The well’s production, however, was not enough to be economically feasible.

The log of the Alisal shows

the typical financial and mechanical problems with the development of early wildcat wells. The Livermore Oil Company, formed at a meeting in San Francisco, set capital stock at \$1,000,000 on 8 March 1909. After land leases were negotiated, a test well was drilled; oil sand was discovered at a shallow depth on July 7. A month later the company signed a contract with driller G.S. Mendenhall. By September 4, they had drilled to 75 feet, and by October 23 oil-bearing shale was located at 250 feet. Work stopped on 15 January 1910 for lack of funds, and a campaign for finding more investors was started. Drilling resumed on February 12; by March 5 the bailer was bringing up several gallons of oil from 600 feet.

The well had to be shut down, however, because of broken machinery, and new parts had to be ordered from Los Angeles. New parts came in a week, but new work was delayed again with the discovery of a 200-foot cave-in that had to be redrilled. On April 9 parts from a tool called an underreamer were lost in the well—this resulted in another delay while they waited for “fish-

ing” tools to be shipped up from Bakersfield. Finally, the well was put on a pump; pumping started on August 28, but not enough oil was extracted to make the well economically feasible.

Section 15 in the Altamont hills was the favored site; 10 out of 25 wells were drilled here. Abandoned holes, however, dot the area from Altamont to Corral Hollow, and from Midway to Tesla and Arroyo Road.

Maitland Henry wrote an excellent series of four articles in the *Herald* in October 1967 on the years of the oil boom from 1899 to about 1926. “Any little seepage or other sign of oil was a temptation to wildcatters,” Henry said, “and whenever they could raise a few dollars to get started, a well went down. ... Hope never died.”

He added, “It can be safely said that no stockholder ever made a dollar on his investment, except those who sold to other investors.” Land owners, who leased their property for \$1 to \$2 per acre to the oil companies, were the only people who profited. However, according to Henry, “in some instances leases became highly complex, resulting in clouds on land titles and the owner wished he had never heard of an oil lease.” (Next week: More Oil—Success at Last!)

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Livermore Boy Scouts Offering 36th Annual Christmas Tree Recycling Program