

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

A Livermore Oil Field at Last

Some of you readers might remember vaguely the Teapot Dome Scandal in 1923 during the administration of President Warren G. Harding. The Teapot Dome is an oil field in Wyoming. We had our own oil dome, an inverted bowl-shaped geologic formation, on the property of Edward C. Rassmussen slightly southwest of the intersection of Tassajara and Manning Roads. The area contained oil and gas seepage, and experts swore that oil must be in the vicinity.

The company in charge of this Tassajara Oil Dome, the Tassajara Oil Corporation, held a gala celebration on Sunday afternoon, 12 November 1939, on the occasion of its drill bit beginning its journey through the earth. This is called the “spudding in” of an oil well. The company paid for a large advertisement in the *Herald* on November 10, inviting the public to the event, saying that “All great things start as dreams.” Two thousand people crowded around the derrick. Frieda Wentz Tubbs, wife of the Livermore mayor, broke a bottle of Livermore valley wine over the drill bit, officially beginning the project. An instant later the bit started downward on its search for underground wealth.

By 2 February 1940 the well had been drilled to 9,000 feet, but not enough oil appeared to justify continuing. A friend gave me a

certificate of 25 shares that he bought on 24 November 1939 for \$1.00 a share from the Tassajara Oil Company. It is an impressive piece of paper with its curlicues and embossed stamp. Our Dome did not create a scandal, but a dry well that defeated the hopes of many local residents.

The Second World War stopped searches for oil for a while. In the 1960s the McCulloch Oil Company of Los Angeles came to the Patterson Pass Road area, just a little east of Greenville Road and the Lawrence Livermore Lab, and succeeded in drilling a wildcat well that produced oil. The *Herald and News* published a photo of the derrick and announced the exciting news on 16 January 1967. P.J. Fazio, vice-president of McCulloch, said the flow of oil was very good. The well is on 160 acres on the south side of Patterson Pass Road. McCulloch leased the land from the Greenville Investment Group. Fazio said that his company

had already leased an additional 1,600 acres in the vicinity. In 1967 leasing rights were \$10 an acre with 1/6 of the income from oil production going to the owner yearly.

Another oil boom began! By March, the Alameda County Planning Commission had approved 35 applications for exploratory wells. The Livermore City Council announced that it would allow use permits even in residential areas. On 11 May 1967 McCulloch confirmed that a second successful well was brought in next to its first well. Wildcatters were busy all over the valley and the hills. In February 1968 county planners approved the application for 21 wells on 200 acres at the northwest corner of Dagnino and May School Roads. But the only successful driller in the 1960s was McCulloch.

An article in the *Oakland Tribune* in 1988 referred to “Livermore’s small share of black gold.” I had seen the area in the

90s, but not recently, so I drove over there last week to see if the pumpjacks were still working. I stopped to see if anyone was around and met Sherri Johnson, a pumper and lease operator for E&B National Resources.

The Greenville Investment Group wells 1 and 2 are still in operation at 2,024 and 1,531 feet respectively. In addition to them on the south side of the road, McCulloch drilled successfully four other wells on Nissen family property. Two of them, Nissen 3 and Nissen 9 are currently producing. The Nissen 3 well was at first a free-flowing well, that is, in essence, a gusher, but a pump was added later. Completed in October 1967, it is 1,501 feet deep. The Nissen 9, completed in October 1971, has a depth of 1,455 feet. Across the road on the north side, the Schenone family has two wells continuing in production. These were drilled by the Hershey Oil Company. Schenone 1 was completed in February 1974 at a depth of

1,519 feet, and Schenone 2 in June of the same year at 1,922 feet. Schenone 2 was redrilled in March 2007 down to a depth of 2,152 feet.

This area along Patterson Pass Road containing six producing wells can legitimately be called the Livermore Oil Field. The wells produce on the average about 40 barrels of crude oil a day. At the current prices averaging more than \$90 a barrel, that is a nice windfall for the Livermore investors. In 2007 pump-off controllers were installed that are turned on and off by a load cell. This means that the pumpjacks do not run continuously, but only when a sufficient amount of underground production has accrued to warrant using the electricity. The production is pumped into a tank where oil is separated from the water. Then the oil is floated into a separate tank, and the water returned into the underground strata.

At the Livermore Oil Field the pumpjacks are still moving up and down. The quality of the oil produced is high. Maitland Henry, editor of the *Herald*, said, “From its gold medal wines, to its gold medal hay and grain, to its gold medal horses, everything that this valley produces is of the highest grade.”

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)