

'When up from the ground came a bubblin' crude!'

In the earliest years of the last century petroleum was making waves. Here in Newfoundland, James Howley, in his Geological Survey for the year 1905 had some riveting facts for Agriculture & Mines Minister Augustus Clift:



Time Capsules
Paul Sparkes

"The use of crude petroleum as a gas producer and as fuel is fast assuming immense proportions.

"In California, where coal is scarce and dear, petroleum is coming into almost universal use.

"All the railroads of the state, steam, electric and cable use oil fuel to generate power almost exclusively. There is hardly a manufacturing plant in California that has not discarded coal, finding it more economical to use the new fuel ... all the illuminating gas throughout California is made from oil, being cheaper, better and less dangerous than coal gas."

This was a lead-up to the petroleum section of Howley's report. Howley was mandated, of course, to update the government on all endeavours in his field, including gold, brick, building stone, cobble and spawls, pyrite, slate and talc. But petroleum was especially newsy in 1905. And Howley did not have to remind the Government that we had oil bubbling up from the ground on the west coast. But what he did want the government to do, was get serious about it.

From our advantage of a century later, the old cliché 'What goes around, comes around' leaps to mind. In 1905 coal was getting a bad name for being expensive. You would have had to hunt to find something bad about oil. Today there is even talk about going back to coal - cleaning it up, making it user-friendly. And we know all about oil today.

There is a measure of excitement in James Howley's words as he speaks in glowing terms about California's experiences with the new fuel. He introduces the example of their ships. Likely that would talk to Newfoundlanders more than reference to cable trains and the like:

"During the past year a number of ocean steamships have been altered from coal to oil-burners, notably the great vessels of the American Hawaiian Steamship Company which run between the Hawaiian Islands and San Francisco and then to New York" (this, by the way, was ten years before the Panama Canal was opened).

"These vessels carry about 10,000 barrels of oil for the trip, making no stop for over 12,000 miles after leaving San Francisco. It has been demonstrated that vessels using oil increase their speed about one knot, due, no doubt, to the fact that the steam pressure can

be kept continuously the same, as it cannot when furnace doors are being frequently opened for the introduction of coal."

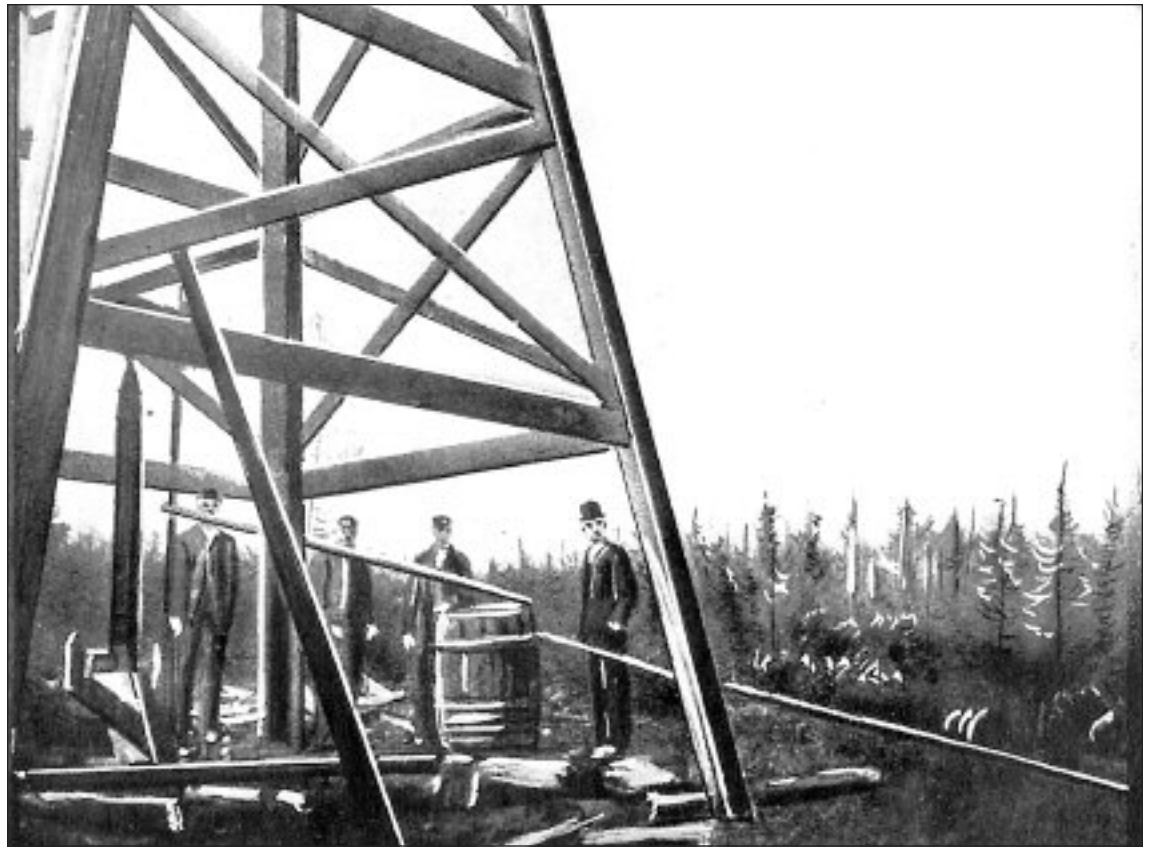
By the way, if the Titanic (launched about seven years after this report was written) had been fitted to burn oil instead of coal, perhaps her speed would have been just a little greater - enough to take her past that approaching iceberg.

Meanwhile, back at Parson's Pond some 105 years ago, the dogged persistence to find a good flow of oil continues.

James Howley reported that in 1904, the Newfoundland Petroleum Co. Ltd., drilled two wells "on the northeast side of the pond" and these met with "a fair measure of success". One of them, having a natural yield of six barrels per day, was promising enough to be subjected to explosives. This might break through to the real flow. No such luck. The well dropped to one barrel per day and ever so slowly came back to 2.5 barrels. The Parson's Pond oil was described as 'heavy body' oil. It coagulated, even turned to wax; it dribbled and it flowed (it seems never to have gushed). There was plenty of infrastructure on site (for the period) and even a refining plant which could produce about 100 barrels a day - the crude being stockpiled in tanks - pumped continuously to keep it from deteriorating in the wells.

Nevertheless, Howley advised the Government to take heed: "The persistent efforts of this company to establish an oil industry in the country is worthy of every consideration." But he showed that the initiative was hampered by high costs - "not the least of which was caused by difficulty in getting supplies to the locality ... "no modern means of communication, such as roads or telegraphs exist."

Nearly ten years prior to this, a syndicate of St. John's businessmen brought in expert G.A. Spotswood. He was excited by the prospects, even though much work was to be done to clean out the wells - and to rid the site of collapsed pipe and other debris from even earli-



John Silver. No doubt at one point in his petroleum-drilling career he saw Newfoundland as his own 'treasure island'.

This doctored photograph from the 1910 book 'Oil Fields of the Empire' shows Parson's Pond well drilling infrastructure as it was early in the century. The caption says "the tools have remained fast in the well for many years. It gives a small oil production." - Courtesy Centre for Newfoundland Studies; Memorial University.

er work.

This initiative turned suddenly silent, however, as Spotswood, described in reports at the time as "a delicate man", took sick and died at a St. John's hospital that same season when he first visited Parson's Pond. At the time, the low value of oil in the world's markets was cited as playing against the enterprise - as was Newfoundland's 'very unsettled state'.

One John Silver is credited with having drilled the first well at Parson's Pond in the 1870s. In fact, Silver's well is said to have been one of the first to have been drilled by steam power in any part of the world. In the 1910 book *Oil Fields of the Empire* (author James Dodds Henry), Silver is described as having also made the first discoveries of oil at Parson's Pond. But while he may have been the first to drill, he did not discover the oil. Seepage had been noted by trappers early in the

1800s.

Now let us come forward in time to the early 1940s: thirty-two holes in all were identifiable, all with six-inch casing, laid from one-quarter to one-half mile apart and one of them, 3,000 feet down ... a solitary well was said to be used by the inhabitants who, by means of a pump driven by wood-fuel fire, obtain enough oil, when refined by themselves, to provide kerosene for their house lamps and gasoline for their fishing boat engines.

At different occasions James Howley (1847-1918) would have reason to protest shutdowns. But as we have noted it was costly and usually disappointing work. The amount sold to fishermen for their engines and refined for local oil lamps, would not say 'market' in any sense of the word.

Today, Parson's Pond still attracts. Maybe its true potential will soon be known. Look up Vulcan Minerals Inc.

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