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HISTORY OF OIL EXPLORATION IN WISCONSIN

by

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Open-File Report 52-3
8 p.

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1952

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G. Bean - Wisconsin (New in year)

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The birth of the oil industry in Pennsylvania in 1859 led to widespread interest in oil exploration elsewhere.

"In 1865 the petroleum fever reached Wisconsin. Early in that year alleged indications of oil were reported from various parts of the State and the reports were readily credited. Feverish excitement in the fortunate districts followed each discovery. Stock companies were organized, derricks and boring apparatus were imported from the East, and operations were commenced in approved eastern fashion. The reputable geologists in the State were unanimous in protesting their unbelief; they explained that the oily blue scum on the surface of the marsh waters, which usually created the excitement, was but the result of decay of organic substances, but speculators refused to be discouraged. In 1865 twenty-four petroleum mining companies were before the legislature seeking special charters, all of which were granted; in 1866 the number had risen to forty-two.¹ Probably as many more not substantial enough to secure special incorporation were operating under the general laws. Appleton with a population of 2,700 was supporting in May, 1865, seven petroleum companies in various stages of organization; the village of Sparta with a population of about 1,300 early in 1866 was supporting ten or twelve, all operating in the Kickapoo Valley of Crawford County. In the southern part of Monroe County a community which still bears the name of Oil City suddenly grew up about an oil discovery. In Crawford County another community, consisting of a hastily constructed hotel and a barn, adopted the same ambitious appellation. At Appleton, where the excitement centered about an old well from which it was claimed gas intermittently discharged, a miniature mining rush took place. On April 5, 1865, the editor of the Appleton Crescent wrote: 'Strangers keep flocking to town. There is a constant stream of visitors to the Northwestern Company's well. House room is becoming so scarce that the newcomers will soon be obliged to bring their tents with them, or "sleep standing".' On February 16, 1865 Col. Charles S. Robinson, the intelligent and conservative editor of the Green Bay Advocate, who was interested in one of the Appleton petroleum companies wrote: 'Who knows but Northern Wisconsin may yet become a place of as much wealth and the scene of as much excitement as the oil regions of Pennsylvania now are.' **

Following is a partial list of oil explorations by counties.

¹R. D. Irving, "Mineral Resources," in History of Dodge County, 162-72; Wis. Assem. Jour., 1865; id., 1866; Wis. Sen. Jour., 1865; id., 1866.

*Wisconsin Historical Publications, "Economic History of Wisconsin During the Civil War Decade," by Frederick Merk, 1916, pp. 117-120.

Adams County

The State Journal of January 13, 1930 had a story from Friendship stating that William Pepers of Randolph had engaged an oil geologist from Ohio, who reported that the "pull was strongest among the scrub oaks and slashings west of the two big rock formations just north of this village." Some 14,000 acres of land were under lease. "The operating company was formed by a few Randolph and Ohio men and unincorporated, the state recently having refused to grant papers to stock companies organized for the purpose of drilling for oil." This well was drilled in 1930 in the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 30, T.18N., R.6E. Here the depth to pre-Cambrian was 265 feet. Drilling continued to a depth of 600 feet in granite. Early publicity stated that the "second sand" would be about 1220 feet.

Barron County

The Milwaukee Sentinel of October 30, 1922 had a story from Chetek, "In the hope that oil in abundant quantities will be found, W. J. Gavin has been obtaining leases on real estate in southeastern Barron County. Mr. Gavin had the land investigated by a geologist who says traces of oil are favorable. It is rumored that a large oil company has become interested and assurances are given that if leases from 8,000 to 10,000 acres are obtained this fall, drilling operations will begin in the spring."

Brown County

In the early twenties the Badger State Oil and Gas Company leased lands in Brown and Calumet counties and offered stock for sale. "This is a rare opportunity to become a participant in an enterprise pregnant with possibilities of future reward. Remember, these oil fields are in Wisconsin, easily accessible by rail or automobile, and this oil has actually been discovered. It is no longer a question of uncertainty or doubt. The oil is of the highest quality and the investors' money will be used only for actual development purposes."

At the Creamery in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 34, T.21N., R.19E. (Holland) oil was reported at depths of 330 feet and between 370 and 380. Thwaites reported that the showings were probably genuine. An oil test was drilled in 1919 near Holland in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 34, T.21N., R.19E. The log follows:

Drift	10 feet
Richmond shale	212
Galena-Platteville limestone	169

Calumet County

An oil test was drilled near Forest Junction in 1935. The log follows:

Glacial drift	80 feet
Richmond shale	227
Galena-Platteville limestone	196
St. Peter sandstone	15

There was a little show of oil and gas. J. J. Faust, driller, reported in 1919 that a gas test was drilled in section 8, T.20N., R.19E. to a depth of 1380 feet, without reaching granite.

Clark County

A number of years prior to 1918 a test well was drilled in the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 35, T.24N., R.3W. This was drilled to a depth of 300 feet in granite before the company went bankrupt.

Columbia County

In 1922 the Wisconsin Department of Securities issued a permit for the sale of \$50,000 common stock of the Cambria Mining and Development Company. Purchasers of stock were informed that the State Geological Survey and the Consulting Petroleum Geologist of the Securities Division advised that there is no hope of finding oil or ore in commercial quantities in that area. After various changes in the name of the company two wells were drilled about 1929. One well in section 1, T.12N., R.11E. reached granite at a depth of 650 feet. Another in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 31, T.13N., R.12E. reached granite at about 665 feet. It is reported that one of these was drilled to about 1,000 feet.

Dane County

A test well drilled in 1932 near De Forest in the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 8, T.9N., R.10E. reached granite at a depth of 760 feet. Drilling continued in granite for 15 feet.

Door County

The log of the oil test of the Calumet Land and Oil Company in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 36, T.27N., R.23E. drilled about 1902 follows:

Drift	6 feet
Richmond shale	540
Galena-Platteville limestone	240
St. Peter sandstone	175

The hole was abandoned when the tools were lost.

A short time later the Tornado Oil and Gas Company was organized and began drilling in the south part of the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 3, T.26N., R.24E. Tools were lost in all the holes but the well in the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 9, T.26N., R.24E. was probably the deepest. The log follows:

Drift	3 feet
Niagara limestone	266
Richmond shale	436
Galena-Platteville limestone	230
St. Peter sandstone	265 or 365

The Wisconsin State Journal of December 1, 1950 reported from Sturgeon Bay, "Officials of the Mano Mono-Oil Syndicate, Appleton, Thursday night announced that drilling for oil would start Saturday or Monday in southern Door County." This syndicate issued a copyrighted map entitled "Geological Map of the Fossilized Sub-soil Rocks of N E. Wisconsin 'Prospective' Oil and Gas Fields." On the map there is a geologic section showing the Paleozoic sediments but omitting the pre-Cambrian granite. At a depth three times the thickness of the Paleozoic sediments there is "oil sand and gas." They dodged the question of granite by indicating formations below the Paleozoic as unknown, but showing limestone, sandstone and shale symbols.

The Milwaukee Journal of March 9, 1951 had the following from Sturgeon Bay:

"Two Michigan oil men have taken steps toward leasing 4,000 acres of land east of here, confident that oil can be found in Door County. Others who tried before them abandoned the quest.

"R. W. Mattlock, Mount Pleasant, Mich., and Orville Regner, Menominee, Mich., are negotiating for a tract near the Lake Michigan shore. About 2,000 acres have already been leased. It is the same land which a Green Bay physician tried to lease for oil speculation several years ago. He was unable to lease the complete tract and dropped his plans.

"Mattlock, who has drilled oil in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio, believes that the Trenton limestone formation, found close to the surface in Michigan, also nears the surface in Door County.

"Trenton limestone was found on the Nestor Alexander farm in Brussels early in January but no oil was discovered. The Michigan limestone formation forms a basin which is the oil producing section of central Michigan, Mattlock said.

"The southern edge of the basin has produced more than 100,000 wells, ranging from 800 to 1,200 feet deep. Mattlock believes that oil may be found at similar depths in Door County.

"Mattlock drilled a well in the town of Brussels near here last year but abandoned it in January after it failed to produce oil. Regner tried unsuccessfully to strike oil in Marinette County last year."

Dunn County

At Knapp, a well was drilled for oil prior to 1915. No oil was found. The well is reported to be 635 feet deep, striking granite at 630 feet. Except for surface material, the sediments were Cambrian.

Dunn County News, September 17, 1936 reported: "William Fennie and an oil man called on A. Stoner, Thursday, trying to lease his land for oil. Most of the farms in New Haven have been leased for oil. When the oil wells start to spout oil, New Haven will be the homes of millionaires." The interest continued at least to June 19, 1942. The most enthusiastic believer in Dunn County oil was Charles A. Parker whose widow carried on. Mr. Lund of Minneapolis made a reconnaissance report and characterized the venture as "wildcat." So far as we know, no stock has been sold, nor has any drilling been done in this hopeless territory.

Fond du Lac County

Rosendale and Springdale. 1930. Mr. Coffin of Minneapolis, the promoter, made occasional visits. Practically two-thirds of the town of Rosendale and part of the town of Springdale were under contingent leases anticipating prospecting for oil.

Iowa County

In late 1951 and early 1952 an oil test well was drilled in the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 8, T.8N., R.2E., east of Avoca by the Avoca Oil Company. The reported log was:

Outwash sand and gravel	215 feet
Cambrian sandstone	590
Granite	85

Jefferson County

Palmyra. An "oil" well was drilled in 1865 near Palmyra, probably by the Palmyra Petroleum Corporation. No oil was found. A log of the well follows:

Drift	46 feet
Galena-Trenton	211
St. Peter sandstone	93
Lower Magnesian limestone	62
Cambrian	<u>338</u>
Total	750 feet

Kewaunee County

A water well drilled for the Green Bay and Western Railroad at Casco Junction in 1927 had the following log:

Drift	50 feet
Niagaran limestone	350
Richmond shale	440
Galena-Platteville limestone	265
St. Peter sandstone	110
Lower Magnesian limestone	55
Cambrian sandstone	390
Pre-Cambrian granite	17

A little bituminous matter was reported in one sample each from the Richmond and from the Platteville. In 1922 there was some excitement at Scarboro because of a small seepage of gasoline and kerosene from limestone ledge near the store.

Langlade County

In 1930 and 1931, the Northern Gas and Oil Company drilled in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 6, T.34N., R.9E., near Farrish. The glacial drift was 236 feet in thickness. Diamond drilling in various phases of schist was carried to a depth of 1220 feet.

Lincoln County

In 1929 or 1930, a well was drilled along Highway 17 in the northeastern part of the county. It is rumored that this exploration resulted in the sale of adjoining land at large prices.

Marinette County

In 1902-3, a well was drilled for oil and gas southwest of Marinette to a depth of 850 feet. This may have reached pre-Cambrian.

About September 29, 1941, the Marinette County Board met in special session to listen to the proposal of Joseph Kinneci, Chicago "oil well driller," Walter B. Wallace, 82 West Washington Avenue, Chicago, and John B. Belmont, Houston, Texas, "oil geologist." E. F. Bean attended the meeting at the request of L. E. Ness, Chairman of the county board, and discussed the geology of the county. He regarded the chance of finding oil in the southeastern part of the county exceedingly small. In the town of Athelstane, which is underlain by granite, there is not the remotest chance of finding oil. He advised the board to lease the county-owned lands for drilling because the public would feel cheated if no lease were given, and because no

serious harm could come if drilling were done. The promoters made attempts to get financial support, but no drilling was done. The newspaper account of October 22, 1941, indicated that they planned the first well "in a township west of the village of Athelstane," and a second one "in the town of Porterfield along the Peshtigo River, not more than seven or eight miles from the heart of the city of Marinette."

In 1950 a test well was drilled by the Z-E Oil Company in section 29, T.31N., R.32E. The log follows:

Drift	36 feet
Lower Magnesian limestone	230
Trempealeau	27
Franconia	164
Dresbach	106
Granite	442

Monroe County

Oil City Test. This well was drilled in 1866 during the period of excitement following the development of oil in Pennsylvania. The depth to granite is 490 feet. Rumor has it that stock sale was stimulated by pouring oil in the hole in the evening after spectators had left. Others say a barrel on the hillside was piped to the well.

Oneida County

In 1929 and 1930, there was some activity. One well was drilled near McNaughton, northwest of Rhinelander. This hole was stopped in granite. Exploration was promoted by O. P. Coffin who claimed to be a geologist and oil expert from Texas.

Outagamie County

An oil test well near Black Creek in section 28, T.24N., R.17E. in 1933 had the following log furnished by the promoter, E. L. Smith:

Glacial drift	280 feet
Sandstone	220
Granite	250

In the Capital Times of February 24, 1933, was the following: "The Federal Oil Pool, Inc. through its manager and field geologist, E. L. Smith, announced discovery of a showing of oil of a quality similar to Pennsylvania and Ohio grade oils." This well is in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 33, T.21N., R.19E.

In the De Pere Journal-Democrat, March 16, 1933, "At present a boring is being made upon the Verbeten farm near Hollandtown and indications are reported very favorable that oil can be found in paying quantities....The drillers have reached a depth of over 400 feet and the well will be shot within the next week or so." The casing was shot out of the hole but no oil was produced.

Richland County

The Richland Democrat of September 27, 1951 reported that drilling would start on the Carl Herold farm in section 29, T.10N., R.2E. His associates were C. C. Nelson of Appleton and H. G. Phillips of Menasha. The Milwaukee Journal of November 18, 1951 reported "Drilling for oil in Richland County ended with a solid third last week when the drillers ran into granite at 710 feet. The project had been under way for six weeks. The venture was estimated to cost \$10,000." Granite was encountered at about the same elevation above sea level in the Richland Center well.

Rusk County

There was quite a flurry of oil excitement in Barron, Rusk and Polk counties in 1926. Colonel J. C. Noble, who had been a lease man with the Ohio Oil Company, was "convinced that oil is seeping up from a depth of 2,000 feet." The Superior Telegram of May 29, 1926, reported, "Mayor R. L. Kuenzli of Cumberland has organized a company which has taken options on lands and one or more wells will be drilled as soon as enough money can be raised. Frank Sebaska and George Kramer of Weyerhaeuser have a large derrick to drill for oil at once on the farm of Stanley Raczak, six miles north of Hawkins." As far as known, no drilling was ever done. A more hopeless place to drill could not be imagined. It is likely that the "oil seeps" were actually a film of iron.

Sheboygan County

The Sheboygan Falls well was drilled in 1923. It is reported that the location of the well was determined by a dream. This well was 400 feet deep in Niagara.

In 1949, an oil test well was drilled near Gibbsville in Sheboygan County by the Wisconsin Oil Refining Company, Inc. Pre-Cambrian granite was reached at 1795 feet. Drilling in the granite continued for 2610 feet.

Vilas County

In September 1930, O. P. Coffin reported that a test well had been "spudded in" at Flambeau. No further information is available. Naturally no oil was found.

Waukesha County

In 1928, Montgomery Voorhees, a real estate man of Milwaukee, secured an opinion on the geology of the Pewaukee area "by Joseph J. Zale, a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines." Drilling continued for awhile. The nature of the advertisements indicated that Mr. Voorhees' primary interest was the sale of lots. No oil was discovered.

Summary

In many cases the promoters of oil exploration were well intentioned. In their optimism they were unwilling to accept geologic advice. One of the promoters mentioned had an interesting history, Edward L. Smith, manager and field geologist for the Federal Oil Pool, Inc. While he was active around Appleton in 1933, we had learned much about his Michigan career as a promoter. The officers and directors were responsible business and professional men from Hortonville and Waupun. Faust Brothers drilled the test well for him east of Kaukauna in 1933. True Detective Mysteries of March, 1935 reported that Edward L. Smith had been sent to Minnesota State Prison at Stillwater for attempted grand larceny. On March 3, 1933, the Wisconsin Real Estate Brokers' Board held a hearing in Appleton on an application for a broker's license for C. M. Jelleff, New London, due to the fact that he had indicated intention of selling oil leases on land in and around Kaukauna. I believe a broker's license was granted contingent upon the completion of a well producing oil or gas in commercial quantity.

As a result of all the exploration for oil extending over a period of eighty-five years, a very large amount of money has been expended. Much of this drilling has been done west of the Richmond-Trenton contact. Because it is certain that there is no possibility of commercial production of oil or gas in this part of the state, that money was wasted. East of the contact geologists have believed that

the chance of profitable production is exceedingly remote. No drilling either for water or oil has proven them wrong. If any large quantity of oil ever accumulated in favorable structures, it has been flushed out.

Quite frequently promoters of oil exploration in Wisconsin have sought to discredit the state geologist of Wisconsin by stating that other geologists had been equally positive, but later proven to be wrong. Michigan state geologists were quoted as saying no oil would be found in that state. The following statements are from a letter signed by Ford M. Pettit, Director, Reference Department, The Detroit News, June 3, 1930:

"In a confidential report Mr. Sweinhart said he had investigated reports that Prof. A. R. Smith, State Geologist, had said there was no oil in Michigan and found them untrue. Mr. Smith has been quoted frequently in the past as to oil, in 1922, in the News of April 9, he said, 'there is plenty of oil in Michigan, not in as large quantities as in Texas and Oklahoma, but enough to make many fortunes.'

"At another time he said that chances were remote for 'any big well.' In March 27, 1921, issue, he said, after a survey, that there was oil in commercial quantities, but he would not venture how much.

"Mr. Smith's predecessor, R. C. Allen, was quoted in The News in a series appearing in 1917 that there was no doubt in his mind commercial pools of oil would be found in Michigan."