

TEXAS TEA...BLACK GOLD



THE DISCOVERY THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

On a bone-chillingly cold morning in southeast Texas one hundred and fourteen years ago, something happened that not only changed the course of the state's history, but also revolutionized the industrial world. Few recall *who* took part in this monumental event; instead it was the name of the little hill near Beaumont, Texas that became instantly recognized around the world...**Spindletop**.

There had been earlier oil exploration near Nacogdoches and Corsicana, but production from these early wells never amounted to much. The investors in the Corsicana fields were looking for water, and the oil zones they encountered were annoying nuisances they ignored to get to the water.

At the turn of the century, virtually all of the oil in the United States came from wells east of the Mississippi River. Even "Col." Edwin Drake's famous 1859 discovery of oil in northwestern Pennsylvania couldn't satisfy the Industrial Revolution's appetite for a fuel that was cheaper and more convenient than coal.

Then, on that chilly winter day, things changed forever. Many people suspected that there might well be oil under the salt dome, based on its sulfur springs and bubbling gas that seeped to the surface there. A group of "believers" formed the Gladys City Oil, Gas and Manufacturing Company in late 1892 and the company drilled some exploratory wells that -- one after another -- turned out to be dry! Soon the investment funding dried up, too.

One man, Patillo Higgins, a one-armed mechanic, lumberman, and self-taught geologist refused to give up. He left the Gladys City group, and persuaded some Beaumont business leaders to help fund some additional exploratory wells. Again, when the shallow wells produced nothing but mud, the investors departed. Higgins placed ads in local newspapers and magazines, seeking investors. Only one man, Captain Anthony F. Lucas, an engineer who had both training and experience, answered the ad.

Even with the new infusion of capital, the initial wells were also failures. But Lucas wasn't ready to give up and persuaded a famous Pennsylvania oilman, John Galey -- who had drilled successful wells in Corsicana in late 1896 -- to join forces with them. Galey went to Beaumont to survey the area and picked the spot for the drilling to begin on October 27, 1900. After two months of aggressive drilling -- through several hundred feet of sand that constantly threatened to cave in -- the exhausted wild-catters shut down for Christmas. They had reached a depth of 880 feet before the holidays, and returned after New Years rested and energized to resume the drilling. Within a week, the well had reached 1,020 feet.

On January 10, 1901 the men pulled the drill out to change some equipment. As they were lowering it back into the "hole" and reached a depth of about 700 feet, they were surprised to see mud bubbling up from the hole. Stems of drill pipe soon followed, shooting out of the ground with tremendous force. In just minutes, everyone for miles around heard a huge explosion as mud...then natural gas...then oil came shooting out of the ground. The "gusher" of greenish-black oil soared more than 150 feet in the air -- showering the area with more oil than had ever been seen anywhere in the world. The well took 9 days to get under control but was soon producing 100,000 barrels a day -- more than all of the other producing wells in the U.S. COMBINED! By 1902, four hundred wells had been drilled into the salt dome, and more than a hundred oil companies had been created to drill for, produce, refine and market Spindletop oil.

Michel T. Halbouty, the legendary Houston oilman, said that the Spindletop discovery "changed the way people would live all over the world." It caused the United States to become a world power, and revolutionized transportation: using it to fuel automobiles, airplanes, and converting steamships and locomotives from coal to oil. Petroleum also revolutionized agricultural techniques and contributed enormously to the nation's quality of life. ♦

