

Book reviews

Spindletop — The true story of the oil discovery that changed the world, Centennial Edition

James A. Clark and Michel T. Halbouty, Gulf Publishing Company, 2000, 306 pp, \$26.95, hardback, ISBN 0-88415-813-6

There is more historical than technical information in this book but it is a good read for anyone interested in the early days of the oil industry (in the USA). In a sense it is timely and one can, perhaps, see parallels between the fortunes made and lost in trading land on and around the hill at Spindletop and the current excitement over '.com' shares.

This is a reprint to celebrate the centenary of the discovery and, apart from an extra preface, the book has no new content. It is unfortunate that the surviving author (Halbouty) did not take the opportunity to add some background on the world oil scene in 1900 as I feel the book rather jumps in at the deep end. Fifty years on, from when the book was first published, there are not many people around who can actually remember the situation at the beginning of the last century.

The story begins with Pattillo Higgins, a self-educated businessman in Beaumont, TX, who was convinced that there was oil under the nearby Spindletop Hill. The first chapters relate his persistent attempts to raise the money and find the equipment to tap into the oil. Following a number of failed attempts, a successful hole was drilled by Higgins' partner, Captain Lucas, and resulted in the first American 'gusher', at 10.30 a.m. on 10 January 1901. Higgins, who had been left in the dark about the deal that Lucas had been forced to make in financing this last well, regretfully made plans to sue.

This discovery, which could produce more oil in a day than the rest of the world's fields combined, turned America into the world's leading oil producer and heralded an era of cheap energy. It made possible the '... liquid fuel age, that inaugurated the rise of America to dominate world power and its people to an abundant life'.

Further chapters detail the desperate attempts of other pioneers to raise the money needed for the frantic trading in, sometimes tiny, plots of land around Lucas' well. In those early days there was frenetic formation, and reformation, of dozens of partnerships and companies, but this ultimately lead to the creation of longer lasting companies such as

Texaco, Sun Oil and Gulf Oil. Unfortunately, it is sometimes a bit difficult to follow these developments because of the lack of structure in the book.

I suspect that this is a consequence of the authors having grown up in Beaumont and knowing many of the town's characters. It is rather like reading a series of reminiscences with, for my taste, rather too much about too many 'fascinating' or 'prominent' citizens. It describes events more or less in chronological order but tends to ramble a bit.

It is not all company history, however, and there is a fascinating description of driving a herd of cattle through a slush pit to muddy up the water, thereby, increasing the density of the drilling fluid to prevent the collapse of the walls of the hole. The book also describes how relatively fragile equipment and techniques developed for drilling water wells had to be adapted for this hazardous operation of drilling for oil at much greater depths. The description of how they capped the first gusher makes hair-raising reading — there was no HSE in those days!

The penultimate chapter reviews some of the long-running lawsuits, which arose from the complexity of the early land transactions. One of them was eventually brought to a successful conclusion by the lawyer son of one of the defendants. When the case had first opened he had not even been born!

The book concludes with two more technical appendices. The first gives a detailed description of the development of a salt dome, the geological structure under Spindletop, and includes some sketches to illustrate the process. The second briefly discusses how geophysics, which enables one to look at structures deep below the surface, led operators to neglect salt domes between the late 1920s and the late 1940s.

'Spindletop' is further illustrated by a number of (monochrome) photographs of the pioneers, local scenes, and other memorabilia. A map of the site is given on the end papers.

In summary, a fascinating story, albeit a bit 'American'.

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