

Oil and Gas Boom

**History of
Cross Creek Church**

Since the oil and gas "boom" was beginning to come into the Cross Creek Country during the early years of Mr. Huston's ministry here, and since this development affected many members of this Church whose properties were tested by drilling for these minerals, we beg leave to digress from the story of the Church itself, so that we can trace this movement in the Cross Creek Country. Many wells had been drilled near Burgettstown around the turn of the century and this activity had spread into the area south of Burgettstown toward the present town of Atlasburg.

Then the movement turned toward Cross Creek Village. One of the earliest operators here was the Ventura Oil Company which drilled well No. 1 on the Abram Pry farm east of the village, testing for gas but striking in this well a good pool of oil. This was the spark which set off the oil excitement around the Village. Leases were taken up on most of the land adjacent to the Village, and keen competition among the operators and their agents existed until all the land was under lease.

Among the prominent operators, in addition to the company named

above, were: R. G. Gillespie, who had many leases in the region around where the town of Atlasburg now stands; Jennings Brothers had several leases in and near the Village; Kelly Brothers and Cooper was the firm holding the lease on the Robert C. Vance farm where at least fourteen producing wells were drilled.

Leases were taken and wells drilled even within the bounds of the Village where vacant lots were large enough to permit erection of a "rig" and where the "sand-pumpings" from the wells could be disposed of. One well was drilled on the lot of Mrs. Jane Kerr, one on the Samuel C. Cummins lot, one on the James Emler lot, and one on the Martin Reed "out-lot." Also, it was decided to have a test well drilled on the lot at the manse on the hill and money was raised by subscription for that purpose. The result was a fairly good well with oil production which realized a handsome profit for the congregation for a number of years. Also, gas in sufficient quantity to supply fuel for the manse was secured from this drilling. (Oil and gas were frequently found in the same well and where the gas pressure was sufficient, it often caused the well to "flow," thus bringing the oil to the surface. In other cases, the gas was shunted off into transmission lines and the wells were pumped to obtain the oil. Gas in these wells was in sufficient quantity to run the gas engines which pumped the wells, and also furnished fuel for many homes in the area.)

The oil and gas "boom" brought a good measure of prosperity to the Cross Creek Country. The movement also brought new individuals and new families into the community and into the Church. On most leases, houses were built by the operators as homes for the families whose men were employed in the "oil field" pumping and maintaining the wells after a good production of oil and gas was established. Near the present site of Atlasburg, a group of houses, given the ambitious name of Gillespie City, housed several of these oil field employees.

Some excitement and an occasional tragedy attended the oil boom here. The wells in this area were drilled generally to the hundred-foot sand found here at the approximate depth of 2,100 feet. Relatively speaking, these were "deep" wells, since in some neighboring areas wells were drilled only through the Salt Sand at approximately 1,400 feet. So considerable work and expense were involved in drilling a single well. First, after "locating" a well, the derrick or "rig" would be built to a

height of about sixty feet. A team of men known as Bailey and Trimmer did most of the rig building here. Then the drilling contractor took over and put his crews to work on "spudding" to start the hole. Among prominent and well-known contractors working in this field were Henry McKinney and Charles W. Tope. These were men of long experience in the drilling business. They were actually mining engineers who had received their training in the school of experience, and they were capable of handling this type of work. The actual work of drilling was done by a four-man crew, who worked in two shifts around the clock. A "shift" consisted of a "driller" who was in direct charge of the work and he was assisted by a "tool-dresser," who fired the boiler and helped the driller in any work which was involved, not the least important of which was the "tool-dressing" when the steel bits were drawn from the well, heated in a forge and "dressed" into new sharpness for continued drilling. The shifts usually changed turns at noon and midnight each day, a shift then consisting of a twelve-hour tour of duty.

The drilling machinery was powered by a steam engine, the steam produced in a large boiler, while the engine was a stationary one, which sat on a huge block of wood in the engine house near the boiler. Power was transmitted from the engine to the "band-wheel" by a heavy belt. The band-wheel had a huge crank on the end of its shaft, and this crank operated the walking beam like a big pump handle, one end of the "beam" being attached by clamps to the cable at the end of which were the tools down in the hole doing the actual digging or drilling. Another belt, usually of heavy rope, carried the power from the band-wheel to the "bull wheels" at one side of the derrick. These bull wheels formed an immense spool on which was wound the heavy cable used for drilling. They had to be operated by power when the cable and tools were pulled from the well. In addition to the big cable, there was a sand line, really a metal cable, which operated the "baler" used to bale out the sand pumpings from the well after each drilling effort. The whole setup on these drilling rigs was a fascinating one and interesting to watch, and often the drilling crew had visitors intent on watching the operations.

As the well approached the desired depth, the word went out that it would be "in" at a certain time on a certain day, so excitement and anticipation increased among those persons most interested: the owner of the well, the owner of the land on which the well was being drilled,

the contractor and, of course, the drilling crews. If a good producer was "struck," the excitement led to the location and drilling of additional wells nearby. But if the well turned out to be a "duster" (a dry hole), then deep gloom prevailed in the area for some time, and it was only after the most exacting consideration that another well would be located and drilled in the same vicinity. The first well in an untested territory was always a "gamble," but as several wells were drilled in a particular locality, certain underground patterns would begin to emerge, and then astute operators would vie with each other in guessing for the best locations of additional wells. At about the time of the drilling excitement in the Cross Creek Country, the United States Geological Survey of this same area was being made, and "logs" from many of the wells drilled in this area became valuable sources of information on underground formations here.

After a well was "brought in," if there were indications of possibly good oil production, the well was "shot" by depositing a charge of nitroglycerine at the bottom of the well, then exploding it to enlarge the "pocket" there and to fracture the strata and increase the production of oil. The "shooter" doing this work was a man greatly experienced in handling the dangerous explosives required. He had a special rig on which to haul the deadly "nitro," and when he came to a well to perform his duty, only authorized personnel were allowed near the rig. Occasionally an accident would happen and it was always a tragic one. One "shooter" was killed and he and his team and rig were blown to bits when the nitroglycerine he was handling exploded prematurely on a road north of Burgettstown. A similar accident happened in connection with shooting a well on the Dunbar brothers farm, now the Casciola farm, two miles south of the Village. One of the successful shooters who did much of this work in the Cross Creek field was Lewis Layley of McDonald.

When well No. 7 on the Johnson farm at the "head of town" in the Village was being prepared for "shooting" at the height of the oil excitement here, the charge of nitroglycerine exploded prematurely at a depth of about 300 feet in the well. This explosion shot the "casing" out of the well and this pipe went through the top of the derrick and when it came to rest, it was protruding about 30 feet beyond the top of the derrick. This spoiled chances for completing the well and also posed

a problem to the drilling crew. Finally, the casing was raised up to a greater height when the weight of it caused it to break off, but that well had to be abandoned with several hundred feet of casing pipe left in the well.

When the Abram Pry well No. 3 was being drilled on a hill about a mile east of the Village, the huge boiler exploded and flew through the air and landed several hundred yards away in a ravine. No one was injured, but John M. White, who was passing by on the public road just below the well, was badly frightened by the explosion since the "run-away" boiler passed almost directly over his head.

Bill McClave, a heavysset man and a driller in the oil field here, fell to his death from a "tubing board," a platform erected far up in a derrick and used when tubing was being installed in a well. This happened at a well on the Magill farm east of the Village. Mark Balmer, who came to Cross Creek during the progress of the oil excitement here and who was prominent in the oil and gas industry in Cross Creek for many years, was operating the engine at this well when Mr. McClave fell. In another tragic accident, Sam Carothers fell into the fly wheel of a steam engine at a well and was crushed to death. George Baker, a native of Cross Creek Village and a young man during these years, was injured by the falling of a heavy iron casting on his head and he died of the resulting injury. Also, a man by the name of Lucas was killed in an accident in the Cross Creek Oil Field.

The fire which occurred in the Village in the spring of 1906 was attributed in part to the oil field activities. On this occasion, lightning struck and set fire to a tank of oil on the south side of the Village, and the burning oil flowed down through town and set fire to a number of buildings.

Some of the individuals and families who came to Cross Creek during the oil boom and who remained to take care of producing wells, and who with their families, became useful members of the Church and community included: Fred Oviatt, August F. Zaebisch, Mark T. Balmer, Clifford Black and William F. Dallmyer. Some others who worked here and eventually moved elsewhere, but who are remembered for their usefulness to the Church and community while they were here were: the Frank Bray family, the William Karnes family, the William Bell family, and no doubt others not presently recalled. In addition to these

families who came to Cross Creek from other places, the oil industry provided employment for many people native to the Cross Creek Coun-