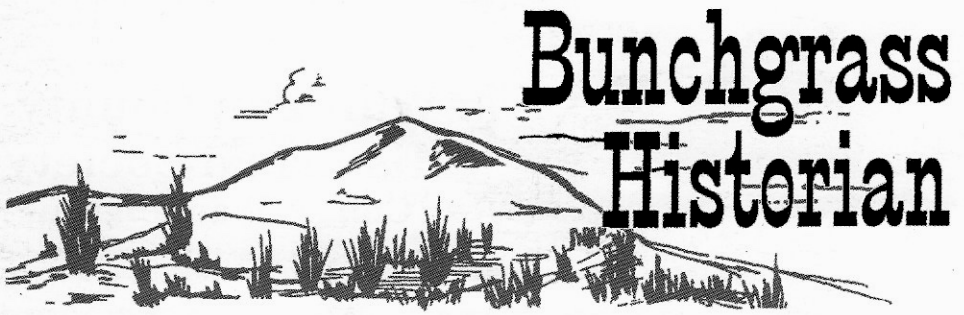


Bunchgrass Historian



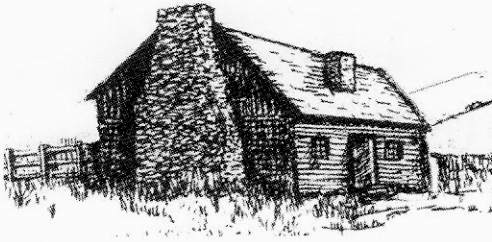
**Whitman County Historical Society
Colfax, Washington**

Volume 37
Number 3
2011



• **THE HOOPERS OF JOHNSON**

• **WHITMAN COUNTY'S HOPED-FOR OIL BOOM**



Whitman County Historical Society Colfax, Washington

The *Bunchgrass Historian* is published by the Whitman County Historical Society. Its purpose is to further interest in the rich past of Whitman County.

BUNCHGRASS HISTORIAN PUBLICATION COMMITTEE

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Current Issues \$4.00
Back Issues (Vol. 1-20) \$2.50

SOCIETY ADDRESSES

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COVER

Amy Hooper, author of the article on page 5, stands 6th from the right - in a white skirt. Her siblings Fred, Charlie, and Frank are also in the photograph. Teacher L. T. Babcock stands in the doorway of the Johnson School circa 1890.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Robert King gives an interesting insight to the origins of this article on oil exploration in Whitman County. “This article developed from all the unexpected articles about oil and gas development in Whitman County I kept encountering while researching some of the early 20th century phase of the Palouse pottery story. I was fascinated with what I began piecing together on oil and gas exploration and speculation in the early 1900s in northern Whitman County — something I had never really heard of before, especially the almost frenzy that happened in 1901. And as I found more, I became more “hooked” on this still most curious tale.” We hope our *Bunchgrass* readers will find this story equally intriguing and enlightening.

The author of this memoir of the Hooper family of Johnson is **Amy Alice Hooper Woodward Fisher** (1883 – 1977). She was the youngest daughter of Miles and Mary Elizabeth Hooper and was born after the family had settled in Johnson. Amy was the author of four volumes of poetry, and an historical novel. She was a school teacher in Whitman County and then raised her three daughters on a 200-acre ranch near Moscow. This account of her family history appears to have been written in the early 1960s. It tells of her grandparents and then her parents coming to Whitman County in the 1870s and details people and events of her youth in Johnson.





In its heyday, Johnson was served by a bank, hotels, schools, and a post office. Sarah Elizabeth Hooper was the first postmistress in Johnson. The community was also served by the Spokane Falls - Genesee branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad, which was completed in 1888.



THE HOOPERS OF JOHNSON

By Amy Woodward Fisher

They had a yen for seeds and trees and the good earth — my paternal grandfather William N. Hooper, and his son, Miles T. Hooper, my father. They were agriculturists in Whitman County, Washington Territory, during the last two decades of the Nineteenth Century, coming West over the first transcontinental railroad to Portland, Oregon, in 1872.

Grandfather's parents moved to Indiana from North Carolina and settled in the southwestern part of the state near Vincennes, in the town of Edwardsport where the Wabash feeds fertile land. Vincennes is the oldest town in Indiana. It was the capital of the Territory from 1801 to 1816. Indiana was part of the Northwest Territory. Three years and forty-one days prior to Grandfather's birth, it became a state. Grandfather and his parents raised sweet corn for their tables and field corn for their stock.

On Grandfather's twenty-first birthday, January 20, 1841, he married Kentucky-born Sarah Elizabeth Azbell, the daughter of Thomas and Sarah Azbell, who had been residents of Edwardsport for several years. They became the parents of ten children.

My mother, Mary Elizabeth Bartlett, was born in Edwardsport. She and my father, Miles T. Hooper, were educated in the same schools in Indiana, became schoolteachers, and taught in the same localities. They were married in Edwardsport. They raised to adulthood a family of eight boys and three girls. The sons were Allen G., John W., Charles B., Arthur L., Fred W., Frank, Walter T., and Albert M. The daughters were Ollie M., Kitty E. and myself.

My oldest brother, Allen, was 4 years old and sister Ollie, 2, when the two Hooper families journeyed from Indiana to Oregon. They settled in Monmouth in the Willamette valley. Father obtained a position teaching



Mrs. William N. Hooper



Mrs. Miles T. Hooper

school, an occupation he followed during his residence in Oregon. Mother also taught school in Monmouth.

Grandfather became interested in the Territory of Washington. He had been hearing glowing stories of the fertility of the soil in Whitman County, where broad stretches of unsettled timberless flat and hill land were waiting for furrows to be turned by the homesteader's plow.

The Homestead Act of 1862 provided that public lands should be given away in lots of 160 acres. The applicant for a homestead merely had to pay a small entrance fee and then occupy and cultivate a certain portion of his acres for five years in order to get outright ownership.

Grandfather wanted to make boot tracks on a homestead of his own in this far western country. He wanted to be a cog in the wheel of early development. He was experienced in cultivating land. He had kinship

with trees. Many times in the Hoosier State he had his knees bent lovingly to the ground when his supple fingers spread the roots of young saplings. Now, he wanted to spread new roots of his own life. This was his dream when he left Knox county in 1872. This was his dream when he left Polk County, Oregon, in 1877.

Grandfather took a homestead in Whitman County, a quarter section of government land two and a half miles south of Pleasant Flat, later called Johnson. The land lay between the present towns of Pullman and Colton. Grandfather and his sons hauled lumber from the Northrup sawmill near Moscow, Idaho, to the site they had selected on the homestead for their buildings.

Grandmother and Aunt Alice cooked for the men working at the sawmill while buildings on the new farm were being erected. Wood for the winter was hauled from the mountains to the homestead.

There were other sawmills located at early settlements in the county. James A. Perkins and Thomas J. Smith claimed land at the junction of the north and south branches of the Palouse River. In the summer of 1870 they hewed out logs for two cabins and gathered several tons of wild hay for their stock. Before the cabins were erected, Smith decided to locate on Union Flat. He arranged for A. C. Harris to take his claim, but Harris abandoned it after a few months. H. S. Hollingsworth



Miles T. Hooper

located on the claim in May, 1871.

Other settlers soon came to the vicinity. With the settlements on Union Flat increasing, the demand for lumber increased rapidly. Perkins and Hollingsworth, with the encouragement of Anderson Cox, the “father” of Whitman County and the town of Colfax, decided to construct a sawmill, a project deeply appreciated by the early pioneers. Palouse, the second oldest town in Whitman County, had more than one sawmill and also had a flour mill. With the death of Mr. Cox in the spring of 1872, the early pioneers lost one of the most faithful and influential workers for the development of Whitman County and all of Washington Territory.

Cox was a citizen of Waitsburg and the first receiver of the United States land office at Walla Walla. He served in the legislatures of both Oregon and Washington territories. He had engaged in the manufacture of lumber on his homestead in Walla Walla County and with his oldest son, Lewis, who was in partnership with him, had built the first sawmill on the Coppei River. He helped to survey the territorial road from Walla Walla to Colfax and secured the location of another territorial road from Walla Walla to Colville by way of the Palouse forks.

Through his influence a bill for the creation of Whitman County was passed by the legislature on Nov. 29, 1871. A daughter of Anderson Cox’s oldest son became the wife of the well-known Dr. Gritman of Moscow, Idaho. Thomas J. Smith, who married Anderson Cox’s daughter, Melissa, Nov. 1, 1870, became the first postmaster ever appointed for any post office in Whitman County, his office being located first on Union Flat, and afterward at Colfax, established in 1871.

For years after my grandparents and my parents settled in Whitman County, they obtained their mail from the Union flat post office at the station called Leitchville. My oldest sister told me of many adventures over the trail that led to the Leitchville Post Office on Union Flat, where she rode her pony, Pinto, for the Hooper mail. Sometimes she met a band of river Indians in bright shawls and black braids decked with feathers. It was then she urged her pony to a gallop, his hoofs leaving a thick trail of dust behind him.

Grandfather’s family had no unpleasant encounters with Indians. While they were making preparations through the summer of 1877 to have their house ready for occupancy in the fall, the Nez Perce Indian War was being fought in the Camas Prairie vicinity. There was no uprising in the Palouse Country, although some of the homesteaders forsook their farms and fled to Palouse, where a blockhouse was set up in case of an attack. Some drove their wagon teams to Colfax and a few as far away as Walla Walla. All returned to their homes after the scare was over.

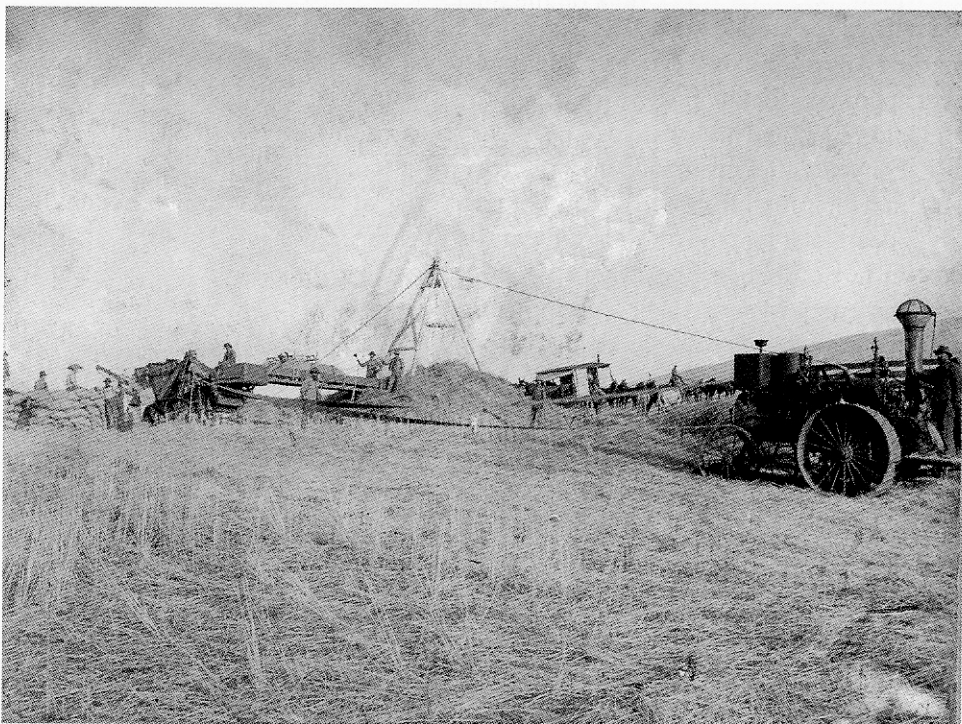
My grandparents’ closest neighbors were the George Kite family. Mr. Kite took a homestead of 160 acres in Whitman County three and a half miles west of Pleasant Flat, in 1875. On the wagon road from Grandfather’s place it was a distance of several miles, but straight across the bills the distance was cut in half.

Another neighbor was Napoleon Haynes, who filed on a quarter section of

government land three miles northeast of Pleasant Flat in the opposite direction from Grandfather's place, on the Moscow-Clinton road. The two farms were close to six miles apart, a long way when mud was deep after a heavy rain. Wagons, hacks, carts with horses attached, afoot and horseback were means of conveyance in the Pleasant Flat vicinity.

My parents left Oregon in the fall of 1879. Quotes from my oldest sister's diary (Mrs. H. M. Pendry) reads as follows: "We started from Oregon to Washington the day I was ten years old, Nov. 9, 1879. We traveled with teams to Portland. We slept in a deserted house the first night; in another building the second night; and in our wagons the third night as we were stuck in the mud. The fourth night we reached Portland. The next morning we started by boat to Wallula, then traveled with teams the rest of the way. We reached Grandfather's place November 23rd. In a few days we children, six of us, came down with the measles."

My father filed a homestead one and a half miles west of Pleasant Flat, and about the same distance north of Grandfather's farm. He erected his dwelling, barn and sheds on flat land surrounded by hills except on the east. Four of my brothers and myself were born on the homestead.



Harvest on Miles T. Hooper's farm in 1898

The public road through Pleasant Flat semicircled our buildings, dipped out of sight over the west hill, then lay in a straight line past and beyond the George Kite homestead to a point where it turned south and became a bridge over the Union Flat Creek. Up a draw from this spot the J. H. Lewis homestead was located. Past the bridge the road circled a hill and became a broad strip through level stretches of rimrock country until it began to dip into a narrow grade through a canyon leading to Wawawai on the Snake River.

At the foot of our meadow on the east, Father arranged a big trough at the spring, which served not only our own stock but as a public watering place. Sometimes when we were walking home from school, Indians would be watering their ponies at the spring.

The Hooper families set out orchards, mainly apple, cherry and plum trees, and currant, gooseberry and raspberry bushes. They planted vegetable gardens and were happily amazed that the rains and drainage of the creeks and rivers furnished bountiful moisture for their crops and produce.

By the time Father arrived in Whitman County, the settlers had discovered that the bunchgrass-covered hills were as productive as flat land for wheat and other grain. Father and Grandfather used horsepower to harvest their crops. They hauled their grain in wagons to Almota on the Snake to be shipped by boat to market.

Almota was the closest shipping point on the Snake River and had the easiest grade to travel over. Other well-known points were Penawawa, Riparia and Wawawai. At Almota, in the fall of 1877, Henry Hart Spalding, son of the famous missionaries to the Nez Perce Indians at Lapwai, Reverend H. H. and Eliza Hart Spalding, was the first postmaster, a position he held for 20 years. The following spring the territorial road from Dayton to Colfax by way of Pomeroy was located through Almota.

At Penawawa one of the earliest settlers was Alexander Canutt, who introduced irrigation in the vicinity and planted the first fruit trees. This point was visited by a steamer every other day. Riparia, one of the oldest places in Whitman County, is surrounded by a very hilly region which was used by homesteaders as a range for sheep and cattle. It was also a shipping point for these animals. Wawawai, eight miles above Almota, was well known to early settlers for the fine peaches hauled up the grade by teams and sold from the wagons at their very doors. If the men on the wagons arrived at the noon hour, a free box of fruit was exchanged for a delectable hot meal. A well-known orchardist at this place was W. L. Lafollette.

An early settler in the Snake River region was C. C. Cram, who had served five years as county commissioner in Walla Walla County. He believed in good roads as an inducement to settlement and trade. He and his son built the Penawawa ferry in 1873. At his own expense, he constructed a road from the Snake River to Pataha, and from the Snake River to Union Flat. He served as postmaster at Penawawa for ten years, moving to the Snake River settlement in 1877.

The Northwestern Stage Company began operating through the region in 1871. It connected the Central Pacific railroad at Kelton, Utah, with the Dalles, Pendleton, Walla Walla, Colfax, Dayton, Lewiston, Pomeroy, and all points both North and West. It used 300 horses, 22 stages, 150 employees, and annually fed out 365 tons of grain and 412 tons of hay.

Local stage lines also operated in all directions, connecting all the principal points of the county and transporting passengers and freight to Snake River landings to be there transferred to the boats.

In the fall of 1876, the Whitman Land District was created, with an office at Colfax. It opened its doors for transaction of business on April 15, 1878. This was good news for homesteaders. They could now make final proof on their land without the expense of a long trip with their witnesses to Walla Walla.

Grandfather and his neighbors did not forget the need of spiritual environment in the community. From the Standard Church Register and Record book, Standard Publishing Co., Cincinnati, Ohio, once in possession of my grandparents, is the following statement concerning the organization of the church to which my parents and grandparents belonged:

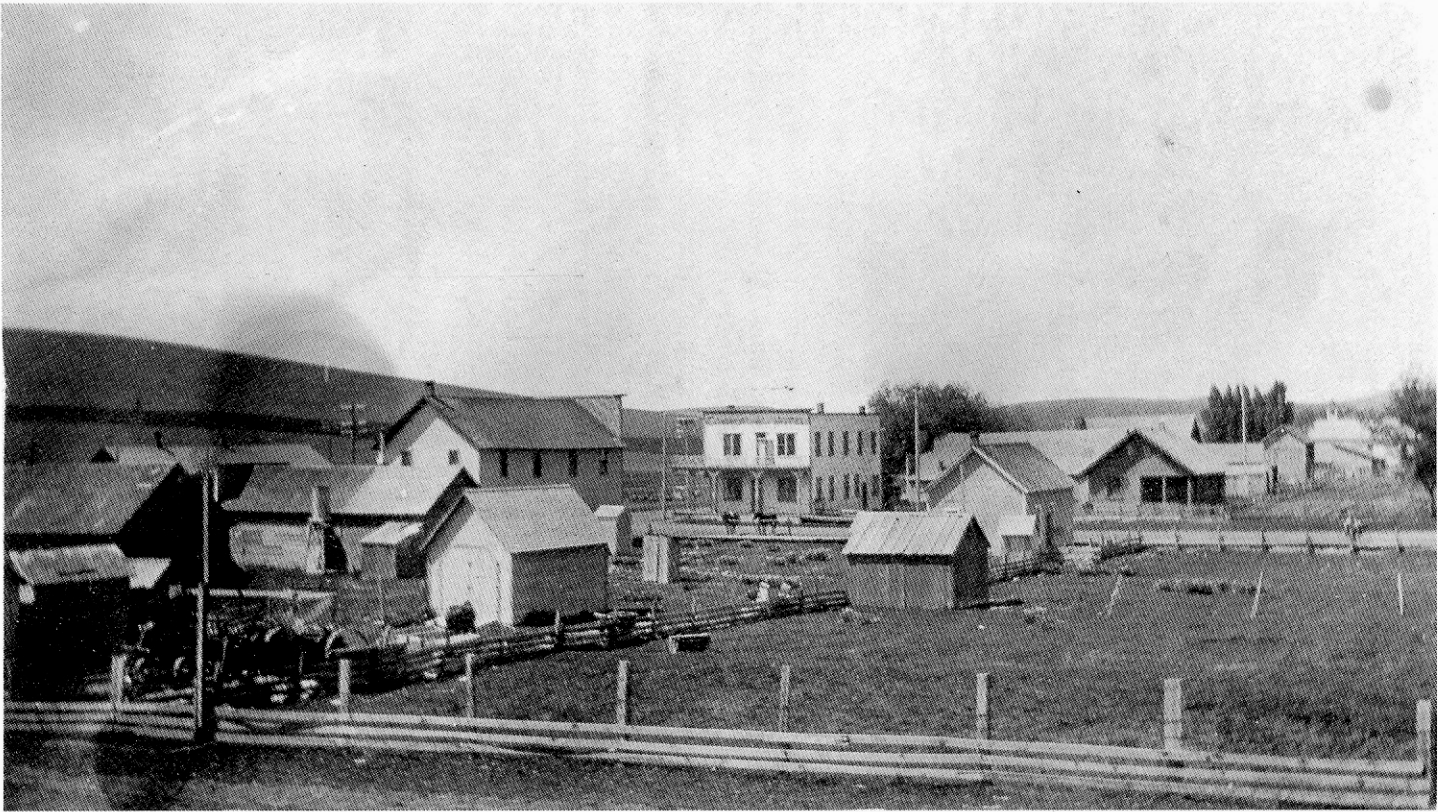
The Church of Christ, known as the Pleasant flat Congregation, was organized by Elder C. J. Wright, Evangelist for district North of Snake River. March the 5th, 1882, with the following members: Andrew Higgins, Mary Higgins, William N. Hooper, George B. Brown, John H. Lewis, Jane Lewis, Ella Lewis, Mary E. B. Hooper, William N. Maxwell, Columbia Maxwell, Elvira J. Brown, A. Warnstaff, Elizabeth Hooper, Thomas P. Ruble, Norah J. Ruble. The following officers were chosen, William N. Hooper and Thomas P. Rubie, Elders; John H. Lewis, William N. Maxwell and Andrew Higgins, Deacons.

The Spokane Falls-Genesee branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad was completed in 1888. Now the wheat growers in the Pleasant Flat area could ship their grain by rail. Uncle Frank built and had charge of the first warehouse there.

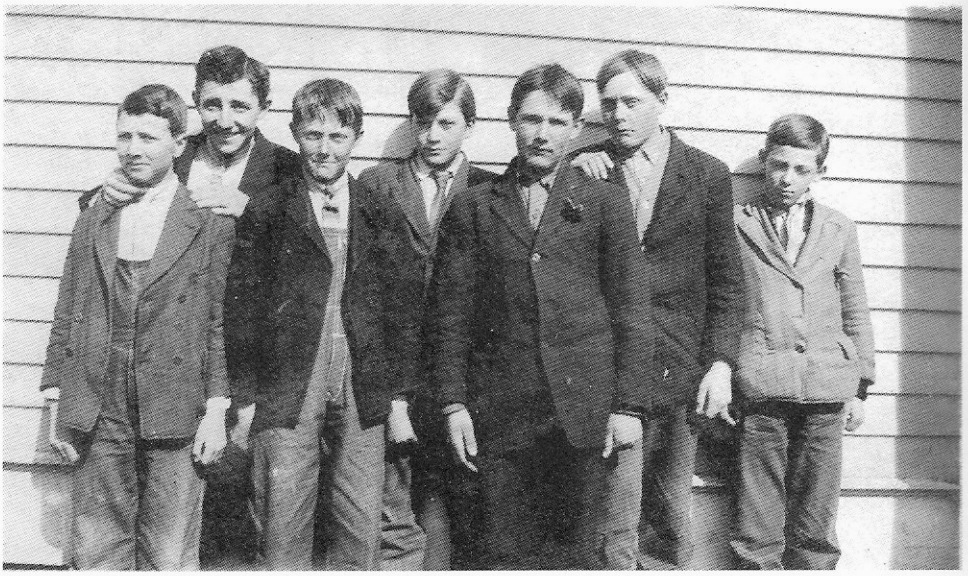
Grandfather retired from his homestead in 1889 and moved to Pleasant Flat. He used his timber culture right for land on which to erect new buildings, raise hay for the cows he kept and grain for chickens and for profit. Each season Father threshed Grandfather's grain. Grandfather built a lovely dwelling on a knoll west of the railroad. He set out shade trees, a small orchard, raspberry bushes and planted a garden. His timber claim was just beyond the fence on one of Father's east fields.

Pleasant Flat became the site for the town of Johnson which was founded by Jonathan Johnson, who had homesteaded land south of Pleasant Flat on the Colton road in 1877. He married Ella Lewis, the eldest daughter of J. H. Lewis on Union Flat. They raised a family and lived for many years on their homestead.

Johnson became a thriving embryo town. Grandfather's house was the first dwelling in the town. A schoolhouse was erected with another building close by



A view of Johnson circa 1912



Members of the Johnson School class of 1910

for the primary grades. Miss Laura Boswell was the first primary teacher and L. T. Babcock taught the higher grades. Brothers Frank and Walter were two of Miss Boswell's pupils. The country schoolhouse west of Harpers' passed into oblivion. The Johnson schoolhouse became a place for church services and public gatherings.

Grandmother was the first postmistress in Johnson, a position she held for three years. The post office was in my grandparents' home. Grandmother kept boarders, mainly schoolteachers, bachelors and preachers. She had immaculate feather ticks on her walnut beds, and starched, ruffled shams embroidered in red thread over a peacock design, which she spread over her plump feather pillows. She made tallow candles and wove carpets on her loom. She churned and made butter, and baked her own bread.

When one of the neighbors asked Grandfather the secret of his fine garden, he told them: "The moon has a pull on the land as well as the sea. My pappy and I planted corn in Indiana when the moon was filling up, and dropped our seed potatoes as she drained her cup.

Grandfather's sons married and raised families of their own. They moved to different localities: Uncle Will to Moscow, Uncle Frank to Seattle, and Uncle Milt to Pullman. Uncle Milt was City Water Commissioner for three decades

Father's first dwelling built on his homestead was destroyed by fire in the fall of 1888, the same year my oldest sister was married to Hugh J. Pendry. Everything was destroyed except Mother's Singer sewing machine, which brother Charles, only a young lad, carried out by himself.

My parents and brothers, Frank and Walter, took a trip to Edwardsport, Ind.,

before the new rose-colored house with the fancy gables was built on the site of the old homestead. Grandfather, a man of great integrity, passed away April 7, 1899.

Father, as many of the other wheat growers were doing, changed from horsepower to steam traction engines to thresh this grain. For years one of the old horsepower tracks, a huge circle made by the tramping of a dozen horses' 48 feet, remained near our red machinery shed where Father had threshed a heavy yield of wheat. Arthur tended separator and Charles was sack-sewer during Father's harvests in the nineties.

Arthur and Kitty entered Washington State University (W.A.C.) at Pullman in 1895. Arthur was captain of the football team and editor of the *Evergreen*. After graduating in 1903, he attended the University of Chicago Law School, and the University of Washington. He taught in Lewis and Clark High School in Spokane, was Chief of Police, and assistant Corporation Counsel for many years. Kitty taught school in Whitman County, two terms in Johnson. Charles attended Blair Business College in Spokane. He was a streetcar conductor in Spokane before moving to Seattle, where he had the same occupation.

In 1893 most of the wheat growers in the surrounding country had bountiful crops of wheat. Father threshed in the rimrock farmers' fields late that year, and the fall rains started in before some of the crops could be harvested. Thousands of golden wheat shocks rotted in the fields, among them, my father's.

Father was an avid reader and interested in politics. He was elected representative of his district in 1894. During the convening of the legislature he and Mother and two-year-old Albert resided in Olympia. Brother John and family moved to our home and looked after the rest of the family, and superintended the farm labor during their absence. After their return home Albert often climbed on Father's desk and delivered speeches on the "pish" (fish) bill and the "popocrats and the damocrats," using gestures with his small hands. Father moved from his half section of land during the first decade of the new century.

Father and Grandfather and their devoted wives were useful citizens in their communities and contributed in no small way to the development of progress. They had seen primitive settlements grow into towns; railroads transplant river steamboats in the shipments of their grain; horses beginning to lose their usefulness in the harvest fields. They had seen Whitman County change its former boundary lines to those that exist today.

These two Hooper agriculturists not only left records of their contributions, but they left a priceless legacy for their descendants. They bequeathed a belief in the dignity of work, in Christian precepts, and gratitude for the opportunities in a land of freedom.

WHITMAN COUNTY'S EARLY 20TH CENTURY HOPED-FOR "OIL BOOM"

By Robert E. King

Oil in Whitman County? Starting in early 1901, there were well-publicized efforts to turn Whitman County into one of the great oil patches of the world. In 1859, the first oil wells had begun production in Pennsylvania, setting off a rush to find the "liquid gold" elsewhere. At that time, oil exploration was even more of a gamble than it is today. Modern geological knowledge and modern exploration methods were largely not available over 100 years ago. Instead, much reliance was placed on exploratory wells and surface evidence. Yet the results from both were not always reliable or reliably interpreted.

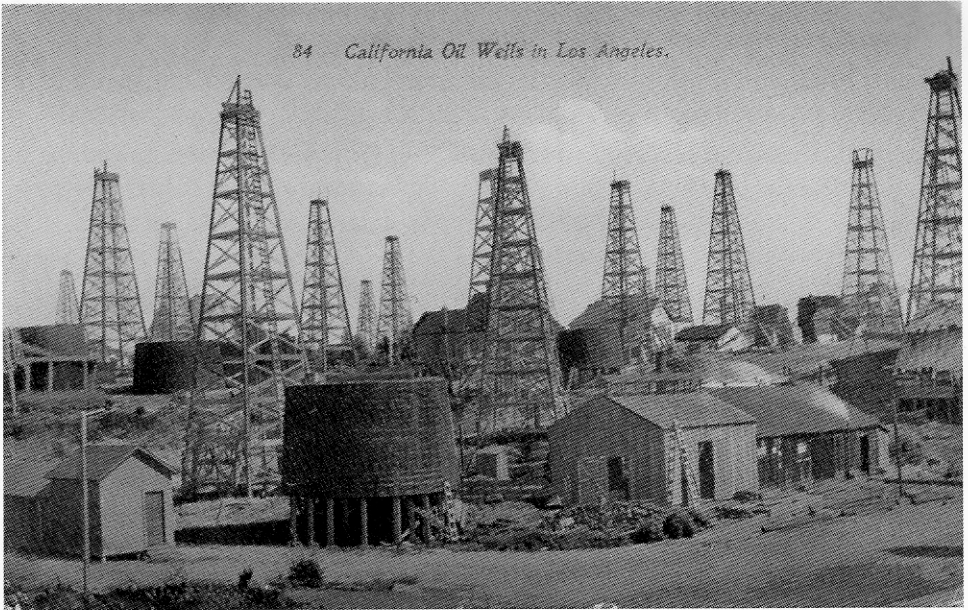
Oil and Gas Evidence in Whitman County?

As early as January 18, 1901, Palouse's newspaper, the *Palouse Republic* (p. 3) was promoting the idea that oil could be found in the vicinity due to "surface indicators," with "nothing lacking" to finding it "but capital to develop the country." Further, the paper revealed that some of its own staff members were among those personally interested in spurring such a development, noting:

If any reader of The Republic has land near the city of Palouse he may learn something about development by calling this office. We are ready to lease a limited amount of land for a limited time. It won't cost you a cent of commission to have your land developed. Leases can be seen at this office for the next 15 days.

Less than a month later, results of the paper's promotion made the front page. Under bold headlines on February 8, 1901, the *Palouse Republic* proclaimed: "CANNOT MISTAKE INDICATION: Crude Oil Flows from Crevice in Rock East of Palouse – Landowners Now Have Faith." The story told that "crude petroleum" was found "in a rock on the [Palouse] river bank above the old mill site," and it had been "pronounced...the genuine stuff" by "A. J. Irwin, an oil expert from Indiana." The article added: "This discovery has created considerable excitement among land owners. It has served to dispel the skepticism which hitherto pervaded the minds of many."

But that was not all. The front-page story went on to tell that new evidence of natural gas had also been found so that "this seepage of oil is not the only indication that quantities of oil and gas are lying idle underneath us, while we depend on the



Early oil speculators in Whitman County and adjoining counties had visions of an oil boom similar to events in California.

wood man to keep us warm.” Accompanying news of the exciting gas discovery was the dramatic story of what happened to the discoverer:

Tuesday afternoon [Feb. 5, 1901] Earl Robards and other boys were skating on the river above Schumaker’s mill dam when they noticed bubbles rising under the ice, which was perfectly clear. They made a small hole in the ice and young Robards knelt down and applied a lighted match to the hole. Instantaneously he was enveloped in flames, which burned his hair and eyebrows, and ignited his clothing. His injuries were not serious, but the fumes of the gas had the effect of giving him a terrible headache. This led to a number of similar experiments being made, and in each case where the bubbles were seen and the ice punctured the gas responded to the touch of the match flame. Businessmen and farmers flocked to the scene and satisfied themselves that the report was authentic. Those who are familiar with the natural gas say the odor is identical.

But what was it? Could it have been “swamp gas” – known by this time to form in limited amounts in certain near-surface swampy areas from decaying plant material?

With the excitement caused by the gas discovery and the injury of young Earl Robards, local area people expanded the search for more gas the very same day.

Tuesday night [Feb. 5, 1901] J. R. Ryerson and a number of others did a little experimenting on the flat near the [Palouse city] depot, where the first discovery of the gas was made. They drilled down some four or five

feet and were rewarded by a flow of gas which burned brightly. The fact that the drill punctured the sub-strata of clay which underlays the soil in this country, and penetrated some distance into the gravel, excludes all possibility of this being swamp gas.

The Palouse paper went on to proclaim excitedly: "The indications in this immediate section are the best thus far discovered in the country, and not only the citizens, but men of capital from a distance are becoming interested."

Oil and Gas Leasing in Whitman County

Immediately the "rush" was on to find more oil and gas in Whitman County. At this time the first speculative leasing of land in Whitman County for oil and gas began. On February 13, 1901, the Pioneer Oil, Gas, & Coal Company leased several tracts of land in Townships 18-19 North, and Ranges 40-41 East, all within a seven-mile radius of St. John, with two tracts less than a mile from town. All had been bought from P. Gilbert,¹ who apparently already had made arrangements with local land owners for drilling rights. Quickly, plans to explore the properties followed.

Meanwhile, local Whitman County newspapers reported more discoveries, with the next at Colfax. On March 22, 1901, the *Palouse Republic* (p. 2) reported information from a recent story printed in the *Colfax Gazette*, which began: "Colfax has natural gas, too, thank you. The prospects are as good as anywhere else along the line." The Palouse newspaper article also provided details about Colfax's intriguing discovery a day earlier:

...J. L. Irwin of the Elk barber shop proved it [the presence of local gas] in an hour. Believing that there was not necessity for Colfax people to go away from home in search of natural gas, Mr. Irwin rigged a gas catcher
A stock certificate from the Lake Creek Oil, Gas & Coal Company issued in 1901



and went to the shores of Cooper lake in South Colfax. Ten feet from the Main street bridge he prodded a hole with a stick and in a few minutes filled a gallon jug. Taking this to the bath rooms of his shop, Mr. Irwin touched a match to the escape valve of the jug in the presence of a number of gentlemen. The results were a strong, steady, yellow tipped flame, which burned until extinguished.

The same March 22, 1901, issue of the Palouse newspaper (p. 3), in a related story entitled “Pronounced Oil Rock,” focused on what it proclaimed as still more indication of promising future oil discoveries in Whitman County – this time near Rosalia. The Palouse paper quoted the following “dispatch” it had received from Rosalia on March 20th:

Rosalia, Wash., March 20. – What is considered undoubtedly rock from an oil bearing formation is coming from a well in this place. The well is being dug to supply the business part of town with water. Two specimens of rock from the well were taken to Professor S. Aughey² who pronounced them soapstone and tertiary sandstone identical with that of California oil fields. He says that these were the only kinds of stone found in the Russian oil fields. The soapstone and sandstone were found in alternate layers from six feet below the surface to the present bottom of the well, 18 feet down. The discovery has attracted considerable attention here.

The March 22, 1901, edition of the *Rosalia Citizen* newspaper (p. 3) identified the drillers as H. Camereau and E. D. Ellis. It also reported that the area with the encouraging rock types could be “removed with the use of a pick or shovel.”

A week later, on March 29, the same paper (p. 3) reported on what was interpreted as more evidence of possible oil and gas in Whitman County. The same city well being dug for Rosalia, at 26 feet down, produced “a seepage of oily substance



oozing from the rock, leaving an oily scum upon the water ... and a great many theories are being advanced as to the probable cause of this phenomena.” The same issue of the Rosalia paper (p. 3) also printed an even more tantalizing story from the *Colfax Gazette*:

J. L. Irwin has had on exhibition at the Elk barber shop [in Colfax] for several days a jug of natural gas from the Spurgeon farm near Rosalia, and has give a number of exhibitions demonstrating its burning qualities. The gas burns with a clear flame and shows every indication of high value, equal, in fact to the product of any of the great gas fields of Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Not to be outdone in reporting stories encouraging oil and gas development in Whitman County, the Palouse paper, in a front-page story on March 29, 1901, printed portions of a letter by J. G. Wright who was at Tehachapi, California, “investigating the probabilities and possibilities” of the American Oil company of Tehachapi. Wright wrote about exploration work in what was not yet a producing district and about speculation that was driving up land prices and wages. Playing on this hoped-for boom and implying that it could happen in Whitman County, the Palouse newspaper prefaced Wright’s letter: “The Tehachapi district, like the Palouse country, shows excellent indications of oil, but is as yet undeveloped.”

Additionally fanning the flames of hope and speculation at this time were reports of supposed oil and gas discoveries elsewhere in the eastern Washington. For instance, on March 2, 1901, the *Pullman Herald* (p. 3) carried the following item: Development of the recent gas and oil discoveries near Medical Lake [about 75 miles west of Whitman County] will be undertaken at once by John S. Theyer, on whose land marked evidences of oil and natural gas were found.

Similarly, the *Sprague Times* on March 15, 1901, (p. 1) reported that parties from Ritzville had found oil at the foot of a local lake, presumably in neighboring Adams County. Earlier, “water so repulsive to taste and smell that it could never be used” had been found in a well dug for a schoolhouse near the lake causing speculation about oil. Local people who had visited the lake “have often seen the indications on the water but this is the first time that any particular flow has been found.”³

A week later, the same Sprague paper reported that more oil speculators were actively exploring the region but had caused an accident. On March 22, 1901, the front page of the *Sprague Times* noted:

A party of oil prospectors mistook Maddock’s big St. Bernard dog for a mountain lion one day this week and killed him. It cost them \$10 to find out the difference between a dog and a lion.

So.... Was it just a matter of time before the Palouse country would become one of the major oil and gas producing areas of the world (albeit with fewer dogs resembling mountain lions)? In early 1901, that seemed possible to some, and within

short order more speculators began leasing additional land in Whitman County for oil and gas exploration and development. On April 26, 1901, the *Palouse Republic* (p. 3) reported:

Several parties are leasing land in the vicinity of Palouse, and it now seems certain that a well will be sunk in a very short time. Experts who have visited this section say we have excellent indications of both oil and gas.

Besides the leasing done in mid-February of 1901 around St. John by the Pioneer Oil, Gas, & Coal Company and apparent leasing near Palouse on April 11, 1901, the Pine Creek Oil & Coal Company also began buying oil and gas exploration rights. This time the tracts were in Township 20 North, Range 42 East, all just west of Pine City and near Pine Creek. The grantor of the new lease tracts was recorded in the Whitman County courthouse as the “John C. Wilson Company.”⁴ This suggests that the drilling rights, like those at St. John, already may have been acquired from individual land owners by a prior speculator.

By May 14, the Pine Creek Oil & Coal Company acquired more exploration rights in the same area from Thomas Edwards and Mr. and Mrs. G. W. Gustin.⁵ Thus, the stage was set for the next step: the start of exploratory drilling in Whitman County. And it would soon happen.

Oil and Gas Exploratory Drilling in St. John area

The April 19, 1901, edition of the *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3) reported that oil drilling equipment had already arrived in the Palouse starting a month earlier, and drilling would soon occur near St. John:

[Charles] Davis' big well drilling outfit arrived here [at Rosalia by railroad] Tuesday [April 16] from Spencerville, Ohio, and is being transported overland to a point about sixteen miles southwest of here, near St. John. The moving of this outfit across the Palouse hills is no small job. The boiler, for the 16 horse power stationary engine, weighs 7600 pounds. The stem is in three pieces. Each piece is 38 feet long. The lower piece weighs 3100 pounds, and the two upper pieces of the stem weight 2500 pounds apiece. The entire outfit including the tool chests and 1600 feet of 2-inch rope cable weighs 40,000 pounds. The drill proper, the stems and the bit weigh 5 ton or 10,000 pounds. The cost of [train] transportation from Spencerville to Rosalia was \$700.00. The big drill will undoubtedly make rapid progress and will be in operation in the course of a few days. A few outfits like this would soon thoroughly prospect this section.

Only a week later, the same Rosalia paper (p. 3) gave an update on the fast-paced venture, including progress with shipping wood needed to build a 75-foot tall wooden derrick to house the drill:

The timbers for the drill derrick, for [the] West place, have arrived from Palouse and have been unloaded and placed on the flat adjoining the town

[Rosalia] on the northwest, beside Pine Creek and only about 300 yards from the railroad track. The derrick will be 75 feet high and some large timbers will be used in its construction. Some of the timbers are 18 x 18, 28 foot long and others are 22 x 22, 18 foot long. The rig will be built for the Davis outfit.

On April 20, the *Pullman Herald* (p. 4) took note of these developments and editorialized:

At last something more tangible than oil and gas indications is about to result. The first machinery for drilling a well has arrived at Rosalia, and the big timbers for the derrick are being gotten out by the Palouse River Lumber Co., and a hole will soon be drilled down to see whether or not the Palouse Country will free itself from the clutches of the Standard Oil Co., and make daylight and warmth out of home products.

With at least one rig preparing to test drill for oil in Whitman County near St. John, the May 3 issue of the *Palouse Republic* (p. 2) interjected a note of caution, tamping down overly optimistic hopes that a single exploratory well would succeed immediately in finding oil. It reminded readers that:

Oil prospectors in the Inland Empire will be fortunate indeed if they find oil after a dozen or so holes have been drilled. Prospectors are aware that a short distance, even a few rods east or west, north or south, may mean a dry hole or a gusher sending oil high above the derrick. This is well understood and so one or two test wells failing will not be regarded as conclusive.

On May 10, the first results of the drilling near St. John appeared in the *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3). While there was no immediate discovery of oil, the report tried to remain positive, including noting the possibly promising find of a small coal seam:

The well which is being sunk by C. Davis for the Vancouver [B.C. Syndicate] is going down rapidly and by this time will have reached the 300 foot level. The formation is very changeable. For instance it took 15 hours to drill a distance of 10 feet while the following 10 feet was drilled through in two hours and a quarter. A small lump of slate, which was brought up before the 100 foot depth was reached and containing a layer of coal an eighth of an inch thick was brought to town Sunday [May 5]. The slatty formation is very brittle and after exposure is easily cut with a knife.

A week later, the May 17, 1901, issue of the *Palouse Republic* (p. 3) reported more developments on venture near St. John:

John McCance, a farmer who lives near St. John, was in Palouse yesterday transacting business. Mr. McCance lives but a short distance from where the well is being sunk for oil. He says the parties have a large outfit, which was shipped in from Ohio and the well is now down to the depth of 400 feet. They profess to think the indications at that depth very good.

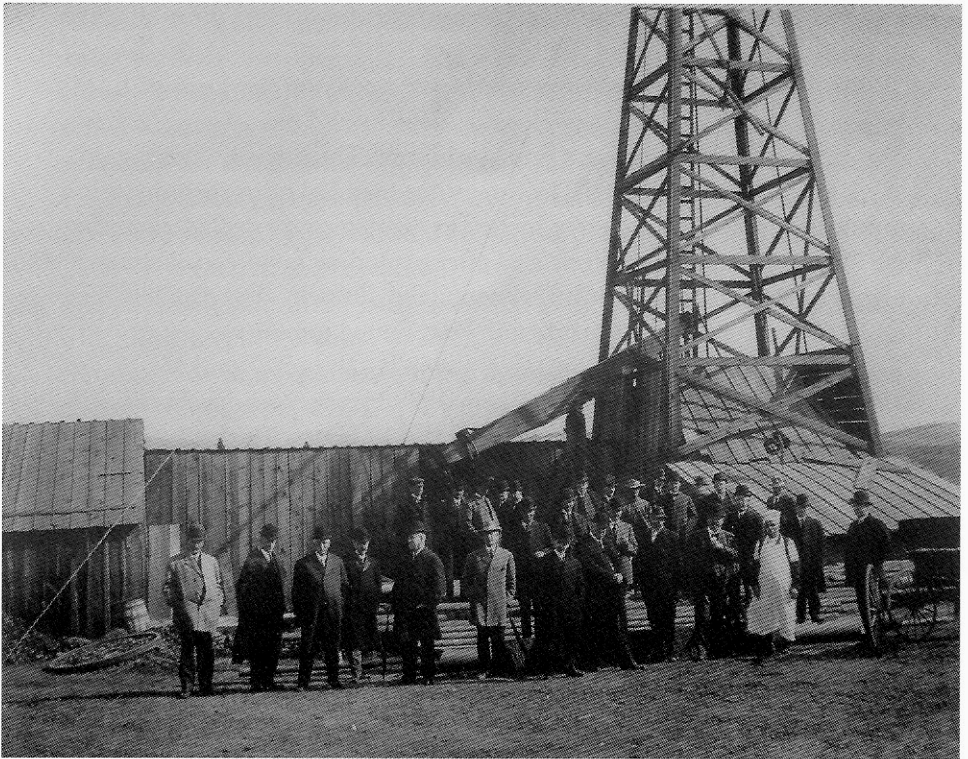


Image courtesy of Glenn Leitz

This oil derrick was erected near Fairfield in Spokane County in 1908

The same paper also noted:

F. J. Boston of Lewiston [Idaho], who was in Palouse some weeks ago leasing lands for oil and gas purposes, has returned accompanied by F. K. McCoy, a Spokane oil man. They are obtaining more leases and we understand intend to sink a well shortly.

Following this mid-May report, the newspapers were ominously silent about the St. John area work for over a month. Then on June 21, 1901, the *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3) revealed the reason:

The Davis oil drill which has been stuck at a depth of 500 feet during the past four weeks, was fished out Wednesday. To accomplish this the heavy drill stem had to be cut off, and the successful accomplishment of the same, at that great depth, is truly marvelous. As soon as the necessary repairs are made drilling will be resumed.⁶

The next issue of the Palouse newspaper on June 28, 1901, carried an optimistic story with more details under the front-page headline "Oil Indications Good":

Rosalia, Wash., June 24. – "Some one will get oil in this country sure, for the oil is here." This is the statement of Charles Davis, an expert oil

driller of Spencerville, Ohio, who has a contact for drilling three oil wells in the country surrounding Rosalia.

Mr. Davis has been at work nearly six weeks on the farm of L. M. Wiley, 14 miles southwest of Rosalia, near Rock Lake, where he has a contract with the Vancouver (B.C.) syndicate. Three weeks ago the drill stuck at a depth of 539 feet. The time since then has been spent in trying to release the drill. A hole six inches in diameter was drilled alongside the other hole and the drill released after exploding hundreds of sticks of giant powder. Some of the charges contained 40 sticks. The drill has been released and repaired and work will be resumed tomorrow.

“The entire distance of 540 feet was in basalt rock,” said Mr. Davis, “and some of it was so hard we could make but six feet per day. In ordinary rock we can make an average of 60 feet in 12 hours. The rock has been getting much softer with depth, and we think we are nearly through the basalt. That passed through last is soft and as black as coal. The prospects for finding oil are very favorable, as the formations and surrounds are similar to those of the great oil fields of Ohio.”

This was an encouraging report despite no oil discovery, and newspaper readers could only wonder what the next issues would report. On July 5, 1901, the *Colfax Gazette* (p. 5) carried this item:

The Vancouver Oil Company, sinking a well on the Wiley place, eight miles north of St. John, on a prospect for oil, has reached a depth of 600 feet and entered a slate formation, mixed with coal streaks.

A few days later, on July 12, the *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 1) reported more progress but also that the increasing depth of the hole was becoming a problem:

The prospective oil well being sunk by the Davis drilling outfit has reached a depth of 660 feet. Only the day shift is working now, as the night shift worked at a disadvantage at this great depth.

Yet still no oil had been found! This was hardly encouraging, but at least work was still ongoing. Or was it? The next Rosalia paper on July 19, (p. 3) didn't mention more work on the Wiley property by Davis, but said: “The larger portion of the derrick for the oil drill on [the] M. H. West place was built during the first of the week.” Davis was to have drilled there also. This was another of the apparently several properties to have been drilled in the St. John area. Yet soon the announced work at the West property ceased (if it began at all) and no other leased properties near St. John were drilled despite initial plans. So, what happened?

The following month, the August 23, *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3) revealed that drilling on the L. M. Wiley property near St. John had ceased altogether and moved elsewhere -- into the southern part of Spokane County that adjoins Whitman County on the north:

The Davis drilling outfit has been completely moved from the Willey

[Wiley] ranch fourteen miles south of here to the Riesland place four miles north of town [Rosalia]. The work of moving this large outfit was completed Wednesday [Aug. 21, 1901]. It will be about two weeks before actual work of sinking will commence, as about that much time will be necessary for the erection of the derrick and other primary preparations.

But that was only part of the story. On the same date the *Colfax Gazette* (p. 4) provided more details. Davis had sold his well-drilling outfit "to the A. G. Hanauer syndicate." The *Gazette* explained:

The full particulars of the causes that led to the abandonment of the well, which had reached a depth of over 600 feet, and the sale of machinery are not made to the public, but the following is as near accurate as the reliable source from which it was obtained could state. The Vancouver Co., for which the well was being sunk, failed to accede to Mr. Davis' demand for a pecuniary settlement, thereupon Mr. Davis suspended work until some settlement could be agreed upon. Having a prior agreement with the Northwest Company, and settlement an impossibility with the Vancouver Co., he offered to sink on the territory of the Northwestern Co., on the West place, adjoining town, but in view of the trouble he had experienced with his former employers he demanded a certain cash sum in advance. This the Northwestern people refused to pay. Last Monday Davis offered the complete outfit to the Hanauer syndicate, who promptly bought it. J. Lytton of Pennsylvania, will have charge of the drilling [in southern Spokane County].

Thus, the immediate cause of the collapse of oil drilling in the St. John area in August of 1901 was the failure to pay Davis for his drilling services. However, the more likely cause was the lack of proof that any oil existed there at all. So, was that enough to end more oil and gas exploration in the region? The answer is no. At the very time that the St. John drilling was ongoing, more Whitman County oil and gas speculators were organizing to work in yet another area. This venture involved notable citizens of Whitman County.

Lake Creek Oil, Gas & Coal Company and Proposed Drilling near Revere

In the summer of 1901, another area in northwestern Whitman County was caught in the speculation spotlight as a possible oil and gas bonanza. It was the Rock Creek area west of St. John, with Rock Creek flowing in a west-southwest direction from Rock Lake through the now virtually disappeared community of Revere, located near the border with Adams County. On June 21, 1901, the *Colfax Gazette* (p. 6) reported that Articles of Incorporation had been filed in the Whitman County courthouse in Colfax for the "Lake Creek Oil, Gas & Coal Company." It was subsequently explained in the *Pullman Herald* on June 29, (p. 4):

The Lake Creek oil, gas and coal company is an organization recently

formed by businessmen of Pullman and Cheney that will make its stock holders rich if promising indications materialize as it is hoped they may. The company is officered by D. [Dr.] G. B. Wilson, president; F. B. Babcock of Cheney, vice-president; D. F. Staley, secretary and treasurer; and Messrs. Wilson, Staley, Waters and Devenish, of Pullman, and Babcock and Ratcliffe, of Cheney, directors. The property secured consists of 1600 acres in the Rock Lake oil belt in the western part of the county. The company is capitalized at \$75,000, divided into 1,500,000 shares, and a quantity of treasury stock has been placed on the market at 2½ cts. per share. Drills are now at work on various properties in the Rock Lake district, and in a short time the problem of oil and gas will be settled. As the oil indications improve with depth, it is expected that gushers will be struck, when oil will be poured on many a fortunate man's poverty. As soon as oil, gas or coal is struck the price of stock in all the companies will advance.

Just before this story was printed, the *Colfax Gazette* on June 21, 1901 (p. 6) reported that the company had signed oil and gas leases for drilling rights with several landowners between Revere and the Adams County line and also some located two-three miles south of Revere.⁷ The Revere area, however, was not overrun with drill rigs. But what is notable about the ill-fated Lake Creek Company was its organization, including the key people involved as officers. Dr. George B. Wilson, the president, was a noted Pullman physician who became a State Senator from Whitman County in 1903. Daniel Fletcher Staley (1866-1930), the secretary and treasurer, later became a Pullman mayor. Charles Miller Waters (1867-1948) was a prominent businessman and owner of a Pullman furniture store; and Oscar Grant Devenish (1868-c1930s), also a respected Pullman business owner, operated a hardware store.

Of further interest, Frank B. Babcock of Cheney, who was vice-president of the Lake Creek Company, was a teacher at the normal school at Cheney. Just before formation of the Lake Creek venture, Babcock had been involved in another speculative company, the Big Rock Lake Oil Gas & Co. in existence by mid-April of 1901.⁸ Because of Babcock's connection to this earlier company, it is quite possible that some of the earlier company's lease holdings, presumably around Rock Lake, also became part of the Lake Creek Company's ultimately worthless holdings. Indeed, there is no evidence that the company found any oil, gas, or coal in quantities justifying development – and likely nothing at all. The other Cheney man in the venture was Charles A. Ratcliffe. He was a Cheney businessman and salesman of agricultural implements.

In July and August of 1901, as the Lake Creek Company was organizing and making what were ill-fated plans, newspapers were reporting that only drilling operations occurring in Whitman County were the ill-fated Davis operation near

St. John and another at the “Hole in the Ground.” It is unclear if hoped-for drilling around Revere would have involved a third operation or would wait until one of the other two had time to drill the Rock Creek properties. While there is no evidence that any drilling actually occurred in the Revere area, it might have happened and gone unreported in newspapers. By that time local papers were becoming a bit weary of no real discoveries of oil and gas after several months of reporting.

Yet, some stories still appeared. On July 27, 1901, the *Pullman Herald* carried a front-page notice that visiting “Prof. [Samuel] Aughey, who has been examining the gas and oil lands in western Washington the past few months, was here Wednesday visiting his daughter [Helen] Mrs. Elton Fulmer.” Her husband, Professor Henry Elton Fulmer, was a professor of chemistry, geology, and mineralogy at Washington State College. No doubt he and others in Pullman were quite interested in what was happening not only in Whitman County in 1901, but statewide (successful or not) as well.

Drilling at the “Hole in the Ground”

A second drilling outfit to that working in the St. John area commenced operation in the summer of 1901 at the “Hole in the Ground,” located west of Malden and Pine City, between Rock Lake and Bonnie Lake. This rather curious name is for a low lying region between Rock Lake to the southwest and Bonnie Lake to the northeast. Pine Creek and its tributaries flow in the vicinity. On August 16, 1901, the *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3) commented that this operation, which had apparently arrived by at least July of 1901, had made little progress:

The drilling outfit prospecting for oil in the “Hole in the Ground,” and which for unknown reasons was standing idle during the past month, was placed in charge of a new crew leader Tuesday [Aug. 13, 1901] and work was resumed.

At the end of August, the *Rosalia Citizen* on August 30, 1901, (p. 3) again commented on what was occurring at the “Hole in the Ground,” describing renewed efforts in the area after a troubling start. It also revealed that a Spokane firm was behind the exploratory work and had hired some of the former employees of the Davis drilling company:

The Spokane Natural Gas Company have [has] engaged Messers. Schaffer and Wright, formerly with the Davis drill, to take charge of their drill at the “Hole in the Ground.” It is stated that a heavier string of tools will be furnished the new crew. They will begin operations sinking anew as the old prospect was left in such a condition by the crew that it was found impossible to continue in it with the desired speedy progress.

The article added:

A number of speculators and capitalists from the [Puget] Sound country were local visitors this week. They were looking over the prospective oil

fields and we understand, were desirous of securing leases. Latest developments seem to indicate that prospecting and development work—which has been almost at a standstill during the past month—will be resumed and advanced vigorously and as fast as possible.

Following this report, more news about drilling at “The Hole in the Ground” disappears from the *Rosalia Citizen*. This hints that nothing was being found. Indeed, the next report by the Rosalia paper on any oil exploration in the Palouse country was on September 6, 1901 (p. 3). And it focused only on what was happening four miles north of Rosalia, in southern Spokane County. The newspaper reported that:

The heavy timbers for the oil drill on the Riesland place arrived yesterday and will be placed in position as soon as possible. With the experience that has been gained since the first prospecting has been done, we state the opinion that the prospecting and development work will make far better progress.

Two weeks later, there was still no word on developments at “The Hole in the Ground.” Rather there was another report on the drilling in southern Spokane County. The *Rosalia Citizen* on September 20, 1901 (p. 3) reported on progress on the Riesland property north of Rosalia: “The Hanurer [Hanauer] oil drill started actual operation yesterday. The time up to the present has been spent setting up the machinery, building the derrick and doing all the preparatory work.” But after over a month of continued drilling, still no oil was found. Eventually, on November 8, 1901, the *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3) told the story as follows, with a hint as to what was (or wasn’t) happening at “The Hole in the Ground”: “The Hanurer [Hanauer] drilling outfit has discontinued work indefinitely. Oil prospecting is now at a standstill, all of which is due to the treacherous underground formation.”

The second sentence of the discouraging report is notable for two reasons. First, while blaming the “treacherous underground formation,” there was still no admission that commercial qualities of oil (if any at all) simply might not exist in the region. Second, the mention that “oil prospecting is now at a standstill” probably was an indirect admission that the “Hole in the Ground” drilling operation had also ceased. Thus, by late 1901, all drilling near St. John, Revere (if any), and “The Hole in the Ground” had stopped without finding marketable oil and gas.

On January 24, 1902, the *Colfax Gazette* (p. 3) finally explained what had happened in late 1901:

The excitement in the supposed oil and gas belt from Rosalia to Rock lake in the north part of Whitman county has about died out. Different companies who last summer worked well sinking machinery at various points have abandoned their prospect holes and shipped their machinery elsewhere. The last well plant, or a portion of it, was purchased last week at sheriff’s sale by R. B. Grimes, when he bought the derrick and buildings of the Vancouver Oil company of Kamiac creek, north of St. John.

The well had been sunk to a depth of 640 feet when lack of power compelled cessation of work and the boring machinery was sold to another company and removed to its prospect near Rosalia. There has been little accomplished to encourage further prospecting and the outlook for a big strike is not so bright as a few months ago.

A week after this sobering assessment, ads in the *Pullman Herald* promoting the sale of stock in the faltering Lake Creek Oil, Gas, and Coal Company ceased. The last was printed on February 1, 1902 (p. 8). They had been in all prior issues of the paper, starting in July of 1901 when hopes were at their highest that oil would soon be gushing in northwestern Whitman County. After the January 24 story, however, the Lake Creek Company quietly faded away, leaving only worthless stock certificates and old newspaper articles that had once been so encouraging. By the fall of 1901, the idea that oil and gas could easily be found anywhere in Whitman County had passed. But would that be the end of it?

Dreams Die Hard

For some, the failure to find oil and gas in Whitman County in 1901 effectively ended hope that these resources could be found anywhere in or near Whitman County. But for others, dreams of “black gold” and valuable gas discoveries in the Palouse were far from dead as later events revealed. Indeed, the February 7, 1902, *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3), referencing a Spokane newspaper story, provided new encouragement that more oil and gas exploration would soon restart:

The Spokane Chronicle is authority for the statements that drilling for oil will be resumed in this country in the spring. The operations will be managed by Mr. Dabney who conducted the prospecting in the “Hole in the Ground.” Just where the prospective well will be sunk has not been definitely decided upon.

In 1903, some oil exploration may have resumed at the “Hole in the Ground,” where a Mr. Dabney was reported as looking over an “oil machine.” But there is no evidence that anything substantial resulted. Possibly related to this, the next year the *Colfax Gazette* on March 4, 1904, (p. 3) and again on July 29, 1904, (p. 3), carried small notices about oil leases in a list of court proceedings. The Spokane Natural Gas, Oil, & Coal Co. had relinquished its leases held in Whitman County. These may have been the ones at the “Hole in the Ground” prompting the possible 1903 activity there, as well as the February 7, 1902 Rosalia newspaper story.

Despite the events of 1902-03 also resulting in no oil and gas discoveries in northern Whitman County, a few die-hards still remained hopeful, perhaps finding encouragement in occasional articles that kept appearing in the newspaper. Even as the earliest attempts to find oil and gas in Whitman County were faltering in mid and later 1901, some county newspapers reported sporadically on possible new evidence suggesting that oil and gas might yet be found. For instance, on October

18, 1901, the *Rosalia Citizen* (p. 3) ran yet another story of a local resident finding what might be evidence for oil near Palouse:

Lon Risley this week discovered a deposit of thick slimy substance on the river bottom near his house, which is supposed by many comes from oil pools underneath. At the place where the substance is found the river bottom is perfectly dry and the gelatinous substance issues from under a sand bar. Mr. Risley will take a sample of the material to Moscow and endeavor to learn what it contains.

The very same issue of the paper also reported an equally odd story, about the nearby discovery of “a new fuel which is believed to be commercially valuable and which cannot as yet be classified by the scientists.” It was found south of Whitman County near Asotin, Washington, and Lewiston, Idaho, and was described as a type of peat or other vegetative mat that was burnable but was previously unknown in the area.

Resumption of Oil Exploration 1907-1937

With stories like these, it was not surprising that over 100 years ago the quest for oil and gas as well as other forms of energy continued in Whitman County. In 1907, more exploration for oil and gas resumed. the *Colfax Gazette* on December 27, 1907, (p. 2) reported under the heading “Oil at Pine City”:

It may develop that Whitman county is a great producer. This need astonish no one. It has been found in less promising countries than this. From our neighbor Pine City a dispatch tells us that the people are still talking oil and expecting to be rich. Oil has been struck in wells bored by Andrew J. Smith, former owner of the flouring mill. Mr. Smith says he has \$12,000 in the bank to spend in prospecting. A company will be organized to take over oil lands and do prospecting.

Another source reports this development:

In 1908 oil scum and gas bubbles were noticed on Pine Creek and the great Pine City oil boom was on. A. J. Smith and his sons bought a drilling rig and drilled for several years and found a type of oil that wouldn't burn when put in a pan with a wick. During this time the Spokane Natural Gas-Oil Company was also drilling unsuccessfully for oil in the Hole-in-the-Ground. The Pine City oil boom soon turned out to be a bust.¹⁰

On November 5, 1909, the *Colfax Gazette* (p. 3) carried a follow-up story under the heading “Oil Struck at Pine City”:

Projectors Have Sunk Shaft 500 Feet—Oil in Place. Rumors have been afloat for some time that indications of oil were manifest at Pine City and other points in the Rock lake region, leading to investigation which will undoubtedly bear fruit. A. J. Smith and sons have been boring for oil on the Smith homestead for some time, with the results that they are down

500 feet and getting crude oil in small quantity that bears the test and casts a flame of brilliancy. No company has been formed, the Smiths doing their own prospecting and paying all expenses. Mr. Smith was in town Tuesday, and to a representative of The Gazette said there was no doubt about oil being in place, although it may be necessary to reach depth in order to tap the living spring. Last week they were in solid rock and only made a few inches a day, but this week, so far, conditions have changed and they are making from three to four feet a day. Mr. Smith feels greatly elated, as, indeed, the community around him are [is] enthused over the proposition.

Despite the optimism, the Smith family's 1907-1909 drilling activity near Pine City, like that done in 1901, ultimately was unsuccessful. Equally, the 1908 work at "The Hole in the Ground" also apparently led nowhere. Further, other wildcat work in the region during the years 1907-1909 had similar negative results. This included the work of The Pine Creek Gas and Oil Company that formed during this time.¹¹ Reporting on its prospects, Rosalia papers once again were hopeful that elusive oil would soon be flowing. Initially, test wells were anticipated to reach 2,000 feet below surface, a remarkable depth for this period and three times deeper than any exploratory oil well dug during 1901, but there is no evidence that this really happened.

Elsewhere at this time, similar dreams of oil and gas underlying the Palouse County led to more speculative oil drilling including nearby in southern Spokane County. In 1908, more exploration took place near Fairfield, Washington, about 20 miles northeast of Pine City. The *Fairfax Standard* newspaper of April 17, 1908 (p. 1) reported that drilling had begun on the Hench Farm one and one-half miles northwest of Fairfield. It was the culmination of work originally envisioned in 1907 but not done at that time due to a lack of funding. By 1908, however, the hope of finding "black gold" led to the formation of a syndicate of Spokane businessmen who "contributed \$25,000 toward this subterranean test." Reportedly, the group also acquired exploration rights to about 3000 acres of land in the vicinity. To do the test, a drilling outfit was brought in described as 82 feet in height, with a "25-horsepower engine, big boiler and equipment to drill a 13-inch hole 3000 deep." It was probably similar to what had been used in northern Whitman County in 1901 and later, and is shown in two pictures provided by historian Glenn Leitz in 2011.¹²

While the Fairfield newspaper enthusiastically covered the story, including giving it front page coverage in its August 7, 1908 edition, ultimately the venture failed, like all the work in northern Whitman County. The disappointing results of all these efforts seemingly would have settled once and for all the question of "oil or no oil?" in Whitman County and nearby regions. Yet they didn't, or at least not to everyone's satisfaction, and the "no oil" conclusion was still resisted. In the decades to follow still more attempts were made sporadically to find oil and gas in the Palouse country.



Courtesy of Molly Benscoter
*Daniel Staley was active in the
Lake Creek Oil, Gas & Coal
Company*

For instance, in the 1920s, oil exploration occurred in the Clarkston Heights out of Clarkston, Washington, south of Whitman County. But again nothing came of it. Longtime Albion resident Pat Old recalled as a boy seeing drilling on a farm neighboring one owned by his grandmother, Mrs. Lucy Crawford, in that area. Yet he also recalled that the exploratory well was eventually capped ending the project.¹³

Still later, in the mid-1930s, there was more oil exploration in southern Spokane Country, about 13 miles northeast of Fairfield. But it, too, resulted in nothing recoverable. For that ill-fated venture, the “Palouse Oil Company” was incorporated. Its headquarters were in the Spokane, with Henry Treed of Fairfield listed as the company’s president in a surviving 1937 brochure printed to draw in investors.¹⁴ The publication also reported that the company had issued one million shares of stock offered at a par value of five cents each. To bring more credence to the venture, it also showed an active drilling operation stated to have reached a depth of 1,785 feet, with the “well now showing both oil and gas.” The venture was reported as 22 miles southwest of Spokane and 1¾ miles north of Manitou Station on the Milwaukee and Union Pacific railroad junction. Yet despite the drilling, again no economically recoverable oil or gas was found (if any at all).

So, is that the end of the story? Will any more oil and gas exploration occur in Whitman County or in nearby areas to the north and south?

Dreams do die hard, and that may be a good thing. As the science of geology advances along with new exploration techniques for detecting and recovering deep oil deposits, the return of exploratory oil drilling to the Palouse country in the future cannot be ruled out. But is there any oil or gas to be found? That issue, after more than a century, still remains quite literally “the million dollar question.” The answer may be left to some future entrepreneurs whose “spiritual ancestors” were those who first drilled in Whitman County and nearby areas over a century ago in hopes of finding “black gold” and rich gas deposits. We can only wish them better luck than what happened in the early 20th Century!

¹ Whitman County, Wash. Deed Book 96, page 239. (Auditor’s Office, Whitman County Courthouse, Colfax, Wash.)

² Samuel Aughey, Ph.D., was a mining engineer born in 1831 near Mifflin Pennsylvania. His long career included an appointment in 1874 as first professor of Natural History at the University of Nebraska, where he was also a curator at the museum. His daughter, Helen Aughey (1867-1951), became the wife of Professor Henry Elton Fulmer (1864-1916) of Washington State College in Pullman. In the early 1900s, Dr. Aughey lived in Spokane and was very interested in what was occurring in Whitman County and nearby. See: <http://pipl.com/directory/people/Samuel/Aughey> (accessed Feb. 6, 2011).

³ The lake was called "Lake Colville," an earlier name for a lake now renamed.

⁴ Whitman County, Wash. Deed Book 99, p. 120.

⁵ Whitman County, Wash. Deed Book 95, pp. 574, 576. Note: These were reported as "extensions of leases," indicating that there were even earlier agreements.

⁶ The Academy Award-winning movie, *There Will be Blood*, about early cut-throat oil development and speculation in southern California in the early 20th Century, realistically depicts the difficulty involved with retrieving drilling equipment lost at the bottom of a well a century ago. Other aspects of this film call to mind newspaper accounts of early exploration drilling in Whitman County.

⁷ Among the property owners mentioned in a summary of actions at the courthouse as selling lease rights were M. Smith, H. Parmeter, J. T. Cole, L. Smith, H. George, W. Fry, M. Campbell, S. Smith, and Frank B. Babcock. Babcock may have obtained an earlier lease from a property owner that he was selling to the new company of which he was an official.

⁸ The *Colfax Gazette*, Colfax, Wash., April 19, 1901, p. 6.

⁹ "History of Pine City," prepared by Terri Ann Johnson Brown, *Pine City Historical Society News Letter*, May 2011, p. 7

¹⁰ "A Brief History of Pine City" by Louise Ager Cox, *Bunchgrass Historian*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Summer 1990, p. 11.

¹¹ The 1907-08 work was also mentioned in *Long Ago in the Northern Palouse: An Anthology of Pioneer People, Places and Events*, compiled and edited by Glenn Leitz, Marquette Books, 2005, pp. 78-79.

¹² One was published in *Palouse Magazine* in July 2004, p. 13.

¹³ Pat Old, Personal Communication, July 13, 2008.

¹⁴ Copy supplied by Glenn Leitz to author, July 12, 2011.



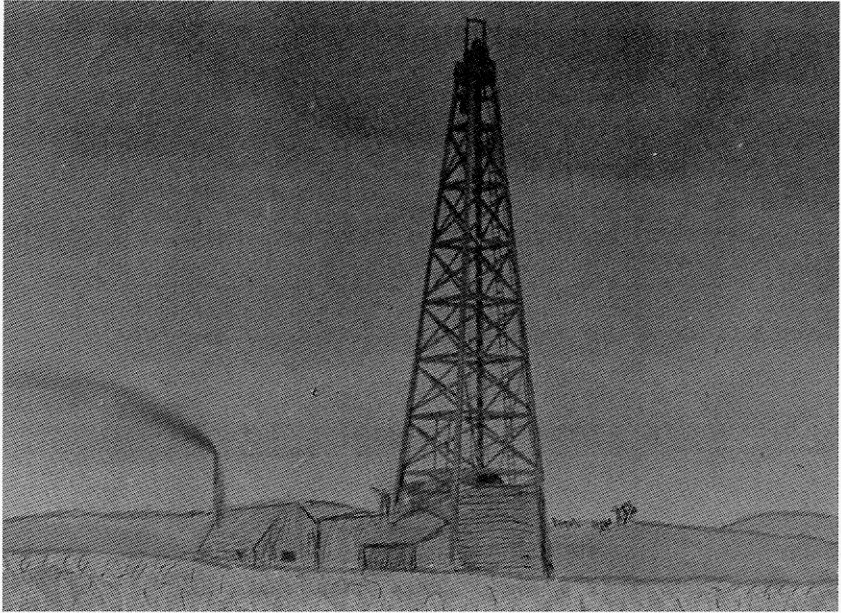
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