



BY SERGE NOIRSAIN

(Translated into English by Gerald Hawkins)

BLACK GOLD

The introduction of petroleum oil in daily life goes back to the night of times. First the Sumerians and then the Babylonians collected black oil that stagnated on the surface of the earth, close to the Euphrates River. They used it to caulk their ships, to seal the construction of their brick homes, to assemble their jewellery and to build their weapons. Alexander the Great used some to frighten the elephants of the Persian army but, on the whole, most other ancient civilizations including the Chinese used it solely for lighting purposes.

The history of American petroleum oil originates in the first contacts between the Indians and the emigrants. The latter exchanged their glassware for black viscous oil, which they used to grease their wagon axles and apply on the wounds of their horses. The virtues of this unusual balm were supposed to heal rheumatisms, burns and sprains. However in 1830, a chemist named J.B. Sillman discovered the highly flammable property of this natural material and the extreme brightness that it created once ignited. In those days, people lit up their homes with whale and palm oils that, besides their foul smell, were becoming difficult to find on the open market. Sillman's discovery was to revolutionise the world and businessmen were soon to explore the potential use and profitability of this strange substance that could be found on the grounds of the Senecas

and Delaware Indians who occasionally collected it from the soil surface where it trickled. However at that time, nobody thought of drilling wells to market the product.

In some areas of the United States, during the first half of the 17th century, the White men sometimes dug wells to extract brine used for the preservation of their food. In Pennsylvania, it frequently occurred that black oil mixed with this brine and the farmers were at pain to get rid of it. It polluted the soil on which it was thrown and killed the fishes of the rivers. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Samuel Kier grasped the money to be made from this supposedly medicinal oil that he carefully filtered and sold in elegant glass bottles. He invested heavily in an advertising campaign that was quite considerable for its days. As early as 1849, thousands of his publicity leaflets flooded the American oriental coast. They praised the virtues of petroleum oil that was being commercially sold for the very first time.

In 1856, one of these flyers landed in the hands of an enterprising lawyer of New York who teamed up with a banker to improve Sam Kier's production and render it more profitable. At the same time, both men learned that large volumes of oil oozed on the soil in parts of Pennsylvania. They went there at once, founded the Pennsylvania Petroleum Co. and entrusted one of their shareholders, Edwin L. Drake, the task of exploiting the 125 acres of land that they had just rented from a farmer of Titusville. Although he later claimed having held a high rank in the army, Drake was never a colonel. His education probably did not go beyond that of primary school, but he knew how to get on with people and possessed the entrepreneurial spirit of the pioneers. His plan was to carry out successive drillings with the appropriate equipment. Unfortunately he didn't have the faintest idea of the kind of apparatus that was required since he had never dug a well in his entire life. He then hired a labourer but his first attempt at drilling ended in a fiasco when the hole completely filled with water. A farmer who knew the area well suggested to Drake that he drive a cast iron tube in the soil to avoid the runoff of water.

Thinking it over, Drake conceived a more refined solution. At his request, an old well digger forged a crude boring tool that was coupled to a small steam engine. The complete contraption was then suspended from a rough wooden structure (derrick). In the beginning, the apparatus only bored three feet per day. On August 27, 1859, the drilling bit reached 75 feet deep but deviated in a crevice. Disgusted, the labourer left the site and went back home. Drake noticed the following day that a viscous liquid had filled the hole during the night. He had just discovered black gold that was steadily flowing at the rate of ten barrels a day. On the eve of the Civil War, Drake was the first man running an oilfield, having extracted 2.000 barrels of crude in a period of four months. Upon hearing that oil "spewing from the springs" at Titusville was fetching 20 dollars a barrel, speculators, investors and jacks-of-all-trades flocked to the scene.

Others soon joined them, such as Cass Rathbone. In 1859, he learned that farmers were frequently encountering black oil while digging brine wells in the vicinity of Burning Springs, Virginia. Rathbone erected his first derrick there and immediately came across petroleum oil. A new California gold rush immediately followed. Hundreds of derricks mushroomed in the area, the price of land rocketed while the town witnessed a dramatic demographic explosion. Its population rapidly increased to 6.000 souls and later soared to more than 10.000 people. An important shopping and business district sprang up from nowhere as well as a sawmill, hotels, private dwellings and official buildings. Not far from the city, a jetty and several warehouses were constructed on the banks of the Little Kanawha River that flows into the Ohio River some 37 miles northwest of Parkersburg.

After the bonanza of his first well at Burning Springs, Cass Rathbone went into partnership with his brother Val. The family then owned 21 acres of land in the County of Wirt and rented the major part of it for 1,000 US \$ an acre. In addition, the two brothers collected a 25 % dividend on all the oil sold by their tenants.

THE CIVIL WAR

The military events caught Burning Springs in its heydays. On April 12, 1861, the Confederates opened fire on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and President Lincoln called for 75.000 volunteers to re-establish the supremacy of the Union on the seceding States. This was a disaster for Burning Springs because most of its labour force and investors came from the North whereas the oil fields were on Virginia soil, and this State intended to rally the Southern Confederacy.

As West Virginia was reluctant to depart from the Union, Cass Rathbone raised a company of forty men and two companies of militia infantry to protect his business. In June 1861, his troop skirmished with a rebel unit, the Mocassin Rangers. For the first time, blood spilled between Virginians. In the meantime, the leaders of West Virginia's counties met in Wheeling to proclaim their separation from Virginia and their loyalty to the Union. They elected a government headed by Francis Pierpont. Once in office, Pierpont called for volunteers to defend the counties recent autonomy and fight for the Union. Rathbone's militia formed the core of the future 11th infantry regiment of West Virginia and Pierpont appointed him colonel. Despite the 10.000 \$ per day revenue from his oil wells, Rathbone accepted his nomination with pride. It flattered his ego and he was furthermore convinced that the sole mission of his regiment would be to maintain his derricks in Union hands.

The events deceived him when his superior urged him to march on the counties of Calhoun and Roane that were roamed by the Mocassin Rangers. It was not this outfit that Rathbone's regiment encountered, but the cavalry brigade of Confederate General Alfred G. Jenkins. Poorly supervised and insufficiently trained, Rathbone's men surrendered without resistance on September 4, 1862. Jenkins paroled them since he did not want to drag prisoners along while heading for Ohio. This small rebel brigade roved 450 miles in western Virginia and even crossed the Ohio River without being bothered by the enemy. One may wonder why, after having so easily defeated Cass Rathbone's unit, Jenkins had not been tempted to destroy the derricks at Burning Springs. This valiant officer probably didn't attach much importance to oil that was not a component of military logistics in his days.

Brigadier General Jacob D. Cox was then in charge of the department of Kanawha (West Virginia) and colonel Rathbone reported to him. Disgusted by his pathetic performances, Cox recommended his discharge to the secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. The formalities of his exclusion from the army followed an unusual if not abnormal course: no file was built against him nor was he to appear before a martial court. The obvious kindness of the Yankee authorities towards Rathbone probably translated their resolve not to jeopardise the economic interest that he represented in the area. Indeed, as the conflict progressed, the demand for oil soared dramatically. The War department provided its troops with kerosene lamps and its railway equipment required tons of lubricants. In spite of the numerous innovations generated by the war, the Confederate command became aware too late of the important role of oil in the enemy's logistical support.

Shortly before the battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863, R.E. Lee ordered JEB Stuart, his cavalry commander, to detach one of his brigades to West Virginia to destroy Burning Springs and the railroad tracks of the Baltimore & Ohio R.R. Stuart assigned the brigade of William E. Grumble Jones to perform this mission. His forces comprised the 6th, 7th and 11th regiments and the 35th battalion of Virginia cavalry, the total strength amounting to 2.100 cavalrymen.

In the report that he addressed directly to R.E. Lee, Jones declared that his troops arrived at Oiltown (name under which Jones designated Burning Springs) on May 9. He went on to say that *“the majority of the wells belonged to Southerners whose property had been confiscated by the Yankee government. They used the oil mainly to grease their equipment and for lighting purposes”*. Jones then ordered to fire all the derricks, tanks, barrels, wagons and pumping facilities. The smoke that was emitted from the blaze was dense and black. The barges full of oil barrels exploded with as much noise as artillery bangs and jets of burning liquid were projected above the river. At the end of the day, clouds of thick smoke followed the meanders of the Little Kanawha River as far as one could see. Flaming oil poured out from the burst tanks and flowed slowly towards the jetty. At nightfall reported Jones, oil flowed into the river that literally caught fire. Some specialists estimate at 150.000 barrels the quantity of oil that was burned. It would take months before replenishing the stocks since the barges could only be used when the water level of the Little Kanawha River was sufficiently high.

General Jones' report doesn't mention anything precise about the destruction of the town of Burning Springs itself. None of its inhabitants were molested; only the oil facilities were targeted for destruction. Warned of the arrival of the Confederates, the population had three hours to take refuge in the woods or to flee to Parkersburg by way of the numerous barges customarily reserved for the transport of oil. Jones is rather modest in his narration of events. Firstly, he does not exaggerate the damage inflicted to the enemy, something unusual for a victorious officer. (The northern oil barons estimated at 300.000 the number of barrels gone up in smoke, double the amount reported by Jones). Secondly, he omits to mention his refusal to accept the payoff offered by Val Rathbone for not destroying his installations. While no Yankee civilian lost his life in this operation, five Confederate soldiers perished accidentally while putting fire to a half full oil reservoir that exploded instantly.

In inflicting the Northerners a damage of 40 million dollars at Burning Springs, Jones had conducted the most destructive Confederates raid ever on a northern industrial complex. As far back as Parkersburg, people could observe the thick clouds of black smoke coming from the city, the oil field and the burning river. Nevertheless, Jones' daring act did not draw the attention of the southern or northern press. As the Union army controlled its telegraph lines, one can easily imagine that its high command censored the diffusion of this information. The success of Jones' small campaign was evidently embarrassing. In thirty days, he had travelled 700 miles with impunity, captured 700 prisoners, killed about thirty Federals, destroyed sixteen railroad bridges and had seized 1.000 heads of livestock and 1.200 horses, all this at the price of only ten killed, fifteen missing and forty-two injured. *“General Jones showed evidence of considerable sagacity and a lot of audacity in the realization of his plans. Courage as well as the firmness of his men helped considerably”*, commented R.E. Lee.

The silence of the federal authorities can also be justified by the imminent incorporation of West Virginia into the Union. As this area was about to reach the statute of State, the affair of Burning Springs would have no doubt disturbed the

proceedings. Even by temporarily censoring the telegraphic communications, the federal government could not have passed indefinitely under silence the eradication of a city of at least 10.000 souls. The limited interest that the raid generated in the press can also be explained by the little importance that the public attached to oil apart from its illuminating utility. Moreover, the military context of the operation contributed to reduce its relevance even further. What was, after all, the loss of a stock of ointment or hub grease at a time when the armies of R.E. Lee and Joe Hooker were about to clash ? In any event, the site of Burning Springs had reduced its production significantly because of labour shortage, most of its workers having been drafted or incorporated into the Union army.

It would only be after the American Civil War and subsequent to the development of the mechanical industry that the Rockfellers and Co. would convert oil into a major stake for the new economic and military strategies.

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