

THE FRANKLIN LETTERS FROM THE LAND OF OIL

Edited by ERNEST C. MILLER

OFTEN found among the papers in estates settled by lawyers, administrators appointed by the courts, and trust departments of banks, are family letters that were of some special significance to the deceased. At times, letters relating to the earliest days of oil in northwestern Pennsylvania are found, and these generally find their way into institutional collections, museums, and the libraries of private collectors of petroleum Americana items.

Strange as it may seem, very seldom have any extensive "runs" of such letters been turned up. It comes then as a pleasant task to be able to report the discovery of a series of ten letters from petroliia written in 1865 by George M. Franklin of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Franklin was born in Lancaster June 9, 1839, and after some private tutoring, he entered Lancaster High School. Later he attended Yale College where he finished with the class of 1858 and spent the next year studying law in his father's office; he was admitted to the bar in August, 1861. A year later he was commissioned a First Lieutenant in Company A, 122nd Regiment, Pennsylvania Infantry, and marched away to war where he saw action at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and many other smaller engagements. He was discharged with his regiment at the expiration of its term of service in May, 1863, as a Captain.

A relative, Major General William B. Franklin, was commanding the Nineteenth Army Corps in the Department of the Gulf at this time, and he appointed George Franklin as Assistant Adjutant General. In such a capacity, Captain Franklin participated in the Sabine River Expedition, the Red River Campaign, Bayou Rapids, and the Caen River Crossing. On October 22, 1864, he resigned his commission and returned home, but not for a long stay. Shortly

Mr. Miller, who is an experienced oil man, and a historian by avocation, has been a frequent contributor to this publication. His paper opens the Centennial Year of Oil as a presentation of oil history for the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*.—Ed.

after his resignation, the greatest period of speculation in oil started and in some manner unknown, he became engaged in the oil business, either as a partner, or perhaps as a combined partner and attorney. The work made a stay in the oil fields necessary and while there he wrote letters to his lady friend, Miss Sarah M. Steinman, whom he later married.

After his stint as an oil man terminated, he worked for and received an M.A. degree from Yale in July, 1866. As a member of the firm of George M. Steinman & Company, he was engaged in the hardware business, and he was also part of the firm known as the Juniata Sand Company, supplying white glass sand for the manufacture of table and plate glassware.

Among other business interests, he was vice-president of the Hamilton Watch Company, and a director of the Farmer's National Bank of Lancaster. For ten years he served on the Lancaster City Council, four years as President, and as a member of St. James' Episcopal Church, he acted as a warden for fourteen years.

Franklin's letters from the oil country date from May 6, 1865, through November 11 of the same year. All were mailed from the town where they were written except the first one. The letters, owned by the editor of this article, are printed exactly as found except for the elimination of some personal writing which does not relate to oildom. All of them were sent to Miss Steinman.

Captain Franklin died at Lancaster on May 15, 1899, at the age of sixty and his obituary merely mentions that he was at one time briefly engaged in the oil business with Mr. J. R. Peale. We can only hope that his oil business turned out to be profitable, but he probably was convinced that a good steady business was better than the ups-and-downs of early oil speculation and gave it up in favor of his Lancaster interests.

(Mailed from Meadville, Pa., May 7, 1865.)

Franklin, Saturday
May 6th, 1865.

I was detained five hours yesterday in Oil City, waiting for the train, and was obliged to stop here to attend to a little business. I leave for Meadville in half an hour, and hope to get through with my business there to-day. As there are no trains running on Sunday I will be shut up there until one o'clock Monday morning. . . . The railroads in this country are one horse concerns, running as a

general thing but one—at most two—trains daily. If I succeed making a satisfactory bargain with the man in Meadville, I will spend Monday in a trip to Tionesta and Pithole Creeks and start for home on Tuesday, which will get me there on Wednesday. Circumstances may delay me a day or two longer, but I think and hope not. I am sincerely sick of this region and anxious to get back to where my heart is. But as I am engineering to make a couple of thousand dollars, I cannot leave until the matter is closed. . . .

Yesterday I walked about ten miles, hoping to get through quicker, and carried my baggage part of the way. Before we finished our tramp I met an acquaintance on horseback, who kindly dismounted and packed our baggage on his beast. Tell George we walked through the Oil Creek region through which he rode on Sunday. He can give you an idea of the pleasures of pedestrianism there. Trying to jump over a mud-puddle, I slipped and fell into it and rolled down the hill, tearing a great slit in my pantaloons by reason of which I am now reduced to the corduroys.¹

Charley Hayes and Harry Decker are here. Charley was as usual last night, and entertained the guests of this inn on the piano. We all slept in the same room last night and Charley kept us awake for more than an hour, alternately exhibiting his imaginary wild beasts and trying to sell oil territory. Bright and early this morning he left, as though he had never been tipsy. We had five sleeping last night in a miserable little room, in dirty beds, and were lucky at that.

Meadville

Sunday May 7th, 1865.

. . . how disgusting it would have been to spend this day in any other town in the oil regions—Oil City for instance.² So you

1 Slipping in mud made worse by a coating of oil was a common daily accident throughout the oil country and has been reported by most of the early visitors who wrote either books about the region or letters to their folks at home.

2 Oil City was an unattractive place during the early oil days. J. H. A. Bone wrote a guide book in 1865 titled "Petroleum and Petroleum Wells," and of Oil City he said, "Oil City at last. Oil City, with its one long crooked and bottomless street. Oil City, with its dirty houses, greasy plank sidewalks, and fathomless mud. Oil City, where horsemen ford the street in from four to five feet of liquid filth, and where the inhabitants wear knee-boots as part of indoor equipment. Oil City, which will give the dirtiest place in the world three feet advantage and then beat it in depth of mud. Oil City, where weary travellers think themselves blest if they can secure their claim to six feet of floor for the night, and where the most favored individual accepts with grateful joy the offer of half a bed and the twentieth interest in a bedroom."

see I have something to be thankful for. We have an elegant room on the first floor which opens on the piazza. There is a beautiful lawn in front of us, and a romantic creek flows through it near by. . . . We had as good a dinner to-day as I ever sat down to at a hotel.³ Being somewhat in luck, financially, I seasoned the ice cream and nuts with a bottle of sherry, by way of consolation for absence from home. For many reasons we were fortunate in finding ourselves here to-day, it being impossible to get home. A classmate, one of my most intimate college friends, came on the train last night, and we have been together all day. I was glad to see the old fellow, especially as he is one of the few bachelors remaining. We intended to go to church this morning, but we were prevented. Two gentlemen sent their card into my room before I had finished dressing, and, as they were about to leave town, I was compelled to talk over some business matters with them. Then my only chance for a bath was rapidly passing away, and I seized it. By the time I finished church was dismissed.

. . . .
Last night I went to hear Mrs. Thompson, a spiritualistic oratoress hold forth in behalf of the Christian Commission. She invited the audience to give her a subject for a poem; they suggested "Niagara Falls." I missed the greater part of this by going late. There followed an eloquent lecture on the "folly of crime," which I suppose was also chosen for her by the audience. I will tell you more about it when I get home. It was very funny. Fortunately, the war being ended, the Christian Commission does not need much more money.

To-morrow morning early I will start for Titusville, where I expect to get your letter. Stopping there about two hours, I will hire a horse and go across to Tionesta Creek as fast as the beast can carry me. The distance is, going and returning, about fifty miles. I hope to get back by Tuesday night⁴ . . .

The trip to Tionesta is not the most agreeable way of filling in the interval. There is this to comfort us—I am doing very well here and . . .

3 This was the McHenry House at Meadville, a railroad hotel long known for its excellent food and accommodations. It was the last opportunity for travelers to taste luxury before disappearing into the oil country.

4 Prodigious distances were covered by oil men, scouts, lease seekers, and speculators, both on horses as well as on foot. Muscles were strong, transportation virtually non-existent, and the desire for wealth was great.

Corry

May 8th, 1865.

I missed the connection this morning, and am enjoying the bliss of waiting six hours in this nasty little town. I took the six o'clock freight train, expecting to get here in time to start for Titusville at ten. I tried the same thing once before and failed, and I have no one to blame but myself. It was my own lazy stupidity that prevented me from getting up at one o'clock this morning If I had reached Titusville at noon, according to programme, I would have ridden twenty miles to-day, leaving thirty for to-morrow. I fear this will detain me one day longer. In the present condition of the roads I have no hope of being able to ride fifty miles in one day I comfort myself with the belief that there is no likelihood of my coming out here again for some months at least. If my horse will stand it I will do my job in one day, but such a vigorous animal would be hard to find in this country.

Titusville

Saturday Sept 16th, 1865.

I got up before six to attend to some business before the early train started. Mr. Wright and nearly everybody else with whom I am intimate went home⁵

Mr. Wright will return on Monday night.

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Don't forget that we move to Pithole on Tuesday, box 1121.

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How does Mame like Bob Nevin's choice of profession? By the time he is prepared there may be a vacancy here, or a church at Pithole. The salary is not large enough to tempt him to habits of luxury, streets are rather dirty, and climate wet and unsalubrious, but preachers have no choice in their younger days.

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What kind of Sundays we will have at Pithole remains to be seen. They are building two new churches, Methodist and Presbyterian I think. At present the former have itinerant preaching in

⁵ Mr. S. G. Wright was apparently a partner in the same oil transaction Franklin was engaged in.

the open air, and the latter make use of the theatre.⁶ When I have seen for myself I will tell you all about it. As far as comforts of all kinds are concerned the departure from Titusville will be a decided loss to us. I can stand it however.

Titusville
Sept 18th, 1865.

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The only excitement of to-day was a brutal fight between two bulldogs, which lasted until one of the dogs had torn out his teeth, and attracted a large crowd, male and female. Such is the refinement of society in Titusville. At Pithole it is still worse.

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Ask George how he would like to live within gunshot of the United States well at Pithole, as it was when we walked over to see it. It is infinitely more disagreeable now. We will move there to-morrow if Mr. Wright returns from home to-night. We will try to rent a house to occupy for a month until we can build one to suit ourselves. After we get permanently fixed I will have a photograph of the house and inmates taken, if there is an artist within reach. If Maj. Hoopes, or any of my friends, contemplate an early visit to this region, do not let them come until our housekeeping arrangements are completed. When the railroad, or plank road, to Pithole is finished, I hope to see your Pa and George here. Just now they could not "travel comfortably." A great many men have their wives living here with them. How they can take them from comfortable homes to subject them to absolute misery is a mystery to me. All these women are doomed to close imprisonment from early Fall to late Summer, with nothing but mud and cloudy skies to look out on; and the indoor comforts are not first class.

Titusville
Sept 19th, 1865.

We did not get off to Pithole to-day because Mr. Wright did

⁶ The first divine service at Pithole was conducted by the Rev. Darius S. Steadman, a Methodist minister; he collected a group on the main street on July 23, 1865, and started a service. The crowd rapidly reached 300 people. Later, before a church was completed, Steadman preached in the Metropolitan Stables, Murphy's Theatre, and in the barrooms of some of the hotels.

not come last night. If he arrives to-night, as I presume he will, we will probably depart hence to-morrow. I cannot leave here until he comes. His brother was here for a few hours this afternoon, and we found time to play one game of billiards, which was the first amusement I have indulged in since our game of chess about a week ago.

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Pithole City
Sept 25th, 1865.

Feeling much better this morning, I came over here. A thunder-storm overtook us on the way and the rain came down in torrents . . .

The weather has cleared off, and we are just debating whether to return to Titusville to-night by way of Plummer, which will give us a ride of about eighteen miles, or remain here until to-morrow.

Pithole City
Oct 12th, 1865.

. . . Mr. Wright came on the cars at Lock Haven, which was a great satisfaction to me, as he had been at Pithole during the fire.⁷ We were not injured at all. Our loss does not exceed ten thousand dollars, and we are insured for fifty thousand. Everything is progressing favorably. The Chicago parties made their payment a little behind time but soon enough to be of service to us in our payment. Oil has gone up from three to six dollars and a half, and is still rising, and I think we will get through our big speculation nicely. The others are also doing well and I am in good spirits.

We are negotiating for the renting of a house to-day. We bought one this morning from Thompson, but as usual, he backed out of his bargain after the contract was drawn up. I have a man out now trying to rent one for a month, until we can build. I hope we will be able to "put our legs" under our own mahogany (or pine) by Monday next. This, and other business, has kept me very busy since I have been here

Pithole
Oct 13th, 1865

I have been busy to-day drawing up the papers necessary to recover our insurance, and attending to various other matters which

⁷ This was Pithole's first great fire which took place October 9, 1865. Twelve wells burned with a loss of about \$50,000.

accumulated during our absence. We find, on examination, that our loss did not exceed a thousand barrels of oil, worth six thousand dollars. Business is very brisk now. There has been a constant stream of teams passing our office since two or three o'clock this morning. Occasionally they get jammed and we see acres of teams utterly unable to move in any direction. Last night Mr. Thompson concluded that we would not give him more money than we agreed on for his house, so he accepted the agreement and we nailed him by giving him the greenbacks on the spot.

I am going up town⁸ as soon as this letter is finished to buy two stoves, kitchen table and house furniture etc, and I hope we will be ready to eat at our own table by to-morrow night or Monday. That will be a great point gained. Since I returned here I have started through the list of Pithole hotels, giving each a trial. I am pretty well down the list now and am thoroughly disgusted. None of them furnished an eatable meal, to say nothing of the filth. Fortunately for me I have been too much occupied to think of discomforts; otherwise I would have been dreadfully homesick.

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Old Brooks is the prince of negroes and Tom and Julia are getting along very well. I expect to get them established in the new house to-night. They have made a great change in the appearance of our office and, I might say, of its occupants.⁹

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An Episcopal minister has just been in to see about making arrangements for starting a church here. The first meeting will be held in the theatre on Sunday.¹⁰

Pithole

Nov 11th, 1865.

Here I am once more, under the dominion of the tyrannical Brooks, with "my legs under my own mahogany" (only it isn't

8 Franklin and his friends seem to have had their residence on their land on the John Dawson farm, this locality being called Dawson Center. It was a mile and a half from the center of Pithole and the terminus of the Titusville Plank Road.

9 Men tended to become "sloppy" in the filth and turmoil of the oil country. Water was often scarce at Pithole and the usual accommodations missing. As Franklin explained, food was universally poor in quality and the preparation of it was deplorable.

10 This was the Rev. D. S. Steadman who was instrumental in the building of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Pithole, the opening of the first organized school in the town, and the disappearance of many of the demireps from the city.

mahogany). It is Saturday night. I reached this charming spot at five o'clock. My horse was at Titusville, so I was spared the risks and agonies of staging it. We did not leave Titusville until one o'clock, because the frozen roads were dangerous to the horses. I was afraid they would break their legs by sinking through the crust. Just think of taking four hours to go eleven miles, half of the distance being good plank road. You cannot imagine the horrible condition of the roads. I will not go to Titusville, except when compelled, until they are thoroughly frozen.

. . . Chittenden left for Chicago this morning, to be gone about a week. I find no change here, excepting that the U.S. Well, the oldest on the farm, was tapped by another and ceased flowing yesterday¹¹; and a new one, larger than the U.S., was struck about the same time. We have just received a dispatch from New York saying that oil has gone up in price. But the roads are so bad we will have great difficulty in getting it to market. There are still several inches of snow in the woods from last Sunday's storm, and it is very cold.

¹¹ Franklin reports the U. S. Well stopped flowing November 10 but it was not until November 23, 1865, that newspapers confirmed this fact. Franklin's date is doubtless right for he was on the ground. Perhaps the well owners were not in a hurry to have the news leak out.