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OILDOM'S PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORIAN

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and

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VIRTUALLY unknown, certainly unheralded, and completely unappreciated — in these few words is a description of John Aked Mather, pioneer photographer, whose skill, devotion, and energy endowed the petroleum industry with one of the finest pictorial records of growth and development of any early all-American industry.

About the same time that Mathew Brady and his twenty-two teams of specially trained assistants were picturing the beginnings of the Civil War for posterity, John Mather came to the rough-and-tumble, bypassed frontier of northwestern Pennsylvania. Mather, an English immigrant, unlimbered his tripod, uncovered his lens, and began to chronicle the rise of America's newest industry — oil.

Wherever and whenever oil was found, Mather was never far behind. He traveled by wagon, in a flatboat equipped as a darkroom, by train, and often on foot, to record everything from new gusher wells, dry holes, refineries, pipelines, tank cars, and personalities, to pretty ladies posing in their finery with a bustling and chugging oil field as

Ernest C. Miller of Warren, Pennsylvania, is an oil man of thirty years standing. His books about petroleum include *Pennsylvania's Oil Industry, Tintypes in Oil*, and just recently, *This Was Early Oil*. In 1958-1959 he was the official historian for Oil Centennial, Inc., the organization that celebrated a century of petroleum in the United States.

T. K. Stratton is a Warren industrialist who has made historical photography his avocation. The two men have often worked as a team on historical research problems.—Editor

a backdrop. He even managed to picture some of the demireps of the boisterous and booming oil towns. People came to his studio from all over the oil country to be photographed, and yet, outside of the original oil region, Mather is hardly known today, and his amazing work has yet to be "discovered" by the experts.

This report is the first attempt to present Mather in his true perspective; until recently most details of his life have been clouded and confused but now, after several years of investigation, accurate information is available.

Mather was born at Heapfold Farm, situated atop Heap Brow, overlooking the town of Bury, Lancashire, England, to James and Sara Aked Mather on September 25, 1829. For many years the date and place of John Mather's birth was confused. For instance, Mrs. Richard T. Jackson II of Cranston, Rhode Island, Mather's only grandchild, told this writer it was always understood in the family that he had been born in Staffordshire, England, in 1827. His grave marker indicates he was born in Heapfold, Borney, England, in 1827. However, there is no town or other location in England such as Borney, and Bury was obviously the intended name.

During his Titusville residency, Mather attended the St. James Episcopal Church and was buried by the Reverend Albert E. Broadhurst, the rector. As he came from England it was thought he had been an Anglican there. A thorough search of Anglican records in Staffordshire and Lancashire proved fruitless. A search was started at the Public Record Office, London, and was without results until it was suggested that the Mather family might have been "non-conformists." As a result of this suggestion, non-conformist registers for the Bury district, which had been collected by the registrar-general years ago, were inspected, and the birth and baptismal records of John A. Mather and one sister and two brothers were discovered.

Mather's obituary in the *Titusville Herald* gives September 26, 1836, as his birth date. This is also the date appearing on his official death certificate filed with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Both sources also give Staffordshire in error as the county of his birth. Even Mather was confused as to his age. On March 2, 1875, he petitioned the Oil Creek Masonic Lodge for membership and stated he was forty-four. On September 25, 1874, he would really have been forty-five years of age and by the date of his petition he had added nearly another half a year. Later, on October 11, 1876, Mather signed a petition to Shepherd Lodge No. 463 and stated he was forty-six. He was actually a year older.

Mather's father, James, was superintendent of the J. Wrigley & Sons paper mill at Bury. Sometime after 1841 he moved his family to Alton, in Staffordshire, where he served as manager of a paper mill owned by the earl of Shrewsbury. Here, under the eye of his father, young Mather learned the paper-making business. Here also, in Alton, Mather made the decision to travel to America; doubtless letters from his two brothers, Edmund and Robert, who had gone to America earlier, gave him the urge, and the fact that he had saved the equivalent of \$1000 by his twenty-seventh birthday provided the means.

Edmund, two years older than John, had settled at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania,¹ while Robert, five years younger, had gone to Nashville, Tennessee.² When John first arrived in America in 1856, he visited Harrisburg, and Edmund was able to offer him a job immediately. But with a vast new country to be seen, and with the money to see it, Mather was not ready to go to work.

He was content for a while to visit and tour the countryside of southeastern Pennsylvania, and wherever he went his violin was his constant companion. A good violinist, music was an abiding interest during his entire life.

Soon he received a letter from his brother Robert who was working for W. S. Whiteman, a paper manufacturer near Nashville. The letter contained an urgent request to hurry to Tennessee; the paper company was having trouble. It had a large order for envelopes which it could not fill because the necessary stock could not be manufactured. Robert was certain that brother John, with his added paper-making experience, could solve the problem. John Mather apparently thought so too, and since this would provide an opportunity to see the South, he decided to make the trip.

The Ohio River was the gateway to the South, therefore Mather went to Pittsburgh where he found the riverboat *Samuel P. Hibbard* about to leave for downriver. He went aboard, asking for the captain who was not there. Since he was expected to return soon, Mather was invited to wait in his cabin. On a table in the cabin was a violin and an instruction book. John picked up the instrument, plucked the strings, and found it horribly out of tune. He deftly tuned it, and at

1 The Wesleyan Methodist Church register, Bury, shows Edmund was born September 7, 1827. At Harrisburg, Edmund entered the hardware business. Today the firm of E. Mather Company, automotive equipment and supplies, is still in business at 112-118 S. Cameron Street. A grandson, Edmund M. Deeter, Jr., operates the firm.

2 The Wesleyan Methodist Church register, Bury, shows Robert was born January 7, 1835.

this point Captain R. C. Grace entered the cabin. Introductions were exchanged, and the captain asked John if he could play the violin. Mather acknowledged that he could and was asked to play "Robert Adair." This he did and followed with a medley of English and Scottish airs.³

Captain Grace was so pleased that he invited John Mather to be his guest on the trip to Nashville. Along with Mr. Smith, the chief clerk, John played on the boat every evening for dancing during the voyage and also on shore during some of the frequent stops. When the *Hibbard* arrived at Nashville, he had had free transportation and a pleasant trip. He was also presented with thirty-six dollars, his share of the money that had been collected for playing during the journey.⁴

Robert Mather met his brother at the Nashville dock. When John walked down the gangplank he was wearing a high, silk stovepipe hat. After greetings were exchanged, Robert whisked John to a haberdashery where the stovepipe hat was replaced with a soft brown hat held in high favor by the Southerners and known as a "billycock."

The Whiteman paper mill was eight miles out of town on White Creek Pike, and John was taken there immediately as Mr. Whiteman's guest.⁵ In due time the process at the mill was altered under Mather's direction, and paper of the proper quality was made. As a result of this success, Mr. Whiteman offered Mather the superintendency of the mill at an attractive salary. Mather refused for he was not ready to settle down. Leaving Whiteman's home, he headed towards Nashville but en route was overtaken by Albert Whiteman, the only son of the mill owner, who pleaded with him to remain with the Whiteman company. Again Mather said no. He then returned to Pittsburgh where he resided at the St. Charles Hotel, Third and Wood streets.

In 1857, Edmund Mather moved from Harrisburg to Sterrett's Gap, Pennsylvania, for the summer.⁶ This mountaintop location had been recommended by Edmund's physician because of the beneficial effect the altitude was expected to have on his hearing. The village

3 "The Story of John Mather," *Oil and Gas Man's Magazine* (March 1913), 664-71.

4 Captain Frederick A. Way of Sewickley, Pa., river pilot and historian, found the correct name of this ship and its captain. The ship was wrecked July 26, 1860, in a collision with another ship, the *Chancellor*, at the foot of the falls below Louisville, Ky.

5 The public library of Nashville, Tenn., supplied the location of the Whiteman paper mill.

6 Sterrett's Gap (now Shermansdale) is eight miles north of Carlisle, Pa., on Pennsylvania Route 34. A marker there indicates it is the farthest northern point reached by any Confederate soldier during our Civil War.

consisted of an assortment of cottages and boardinghouse-type hotels. Edmund had rented a boardinghouse and was catering to guests.

It was here that John Mather again visited Edmund after he left Pittsburgh. Late one afternoon during this visit an itinerant photographer's wagon came to a halt before the Edmund Mather boardinghouse. The photographer, a man by the name of Johnson, sought lodging for the night.⁷

The conversation during the evening revealed that Johnson operated six such portrait vans or studios which traveled from town to town taking pictures. Johnson and John Mather talked at length about photography that evening, and when Johnson departed the next morning, Mather was sitting beside him on the seat of the wagon, his violin carefully cradled against the jolts and jars of the journey. When Johnson called out "giddyap," the wagon moved forward, and so too did John Mather — into a career of professional photography.

Johnson and his new apprentice spent considerable time traveling through the villages of Maryland and Virginia (now West Virginia). Young Mather proved an apt student. Soon he had mastered the processes, not at all easy with the crude and cumbersome equipment of the period. In 1858, Mather and Johnson parted company on an amicable basis. Mather's camera, according to trade catalogs of that day, probably cost him \$49.50. Among the many supplies he would have to purchase to become a professional photographer would be glass plates and the necessary chemicals. And certainly one of his biggest investments was the construction of his photographic van — a specially built wagon which was, in effect, a darkroom on wheels. When this had been accomplished, Mather loaded the van, hitched up his horse, and embarked on the career that was to last his lifetime.

Taking pictures in 1858 was not the relatively simple procedure it is today. While J. Nicéphore Niepce of France was the first to find a photographic method which could produce pictures subsequently unaffected by light in 1827 and Daguerre improved upon the method, the greatest impetus came in 1850 with the introduction of collodion. In this method, a glass plate was carefully cleaned, wiped, and polished with silk or chamois, then a collodion containing soluble iodides and bromides was slowly poured onto the plate while the plate was kept in

7 Mr. Wm. Culp Darrah of Gettysburg, Pa., has compiled a comprehensive index on more than 2,100 American photographers of the early days and has suggested that Mather's teacher might have been T. H. Johnson. Johnson was operating a studio in Detroit in 1866, the last date known for him.

motion in order that this emulsion would completely coat one side of the glass. The excess was then drained back into the pouring flask. When the collodion was set, the plate was immersed in a bath of silver nitrate, being lowered into a vertical tank scarcely larger than the plate itself, then agitated until all repellent action between the silver nitrate and the solvent of the collodion was removed. The plate was allowed to rest for a few moments, removed, and then placed in a dark slide ready for exposure in the camera.

Following exposure, the plate was removed from the slide in the darkroom and the developing solution applied. Gradually the image appeared, building up from the silver nitrate clinging to the plate which was reduced to the metallic state by degrees. It was a slow, painstaking process, one which required care and diligence for consistent results. Mather's pictures show he was a master workman and knew his business thoroughly.⁸

An action typical of Mather, whose temper at times bested him, took place at Bedford, Ohio. Coming to a creek just outside the town, he found a weakened bridge which was in the process of being repaired, and workmen had nailed a large plank across the entrance. With an axe Mather impulsively cut the plank, drove over the bridge, and continued into the village. Upon his arrival a constable arrested him for malicious conduct. Mather, virtually penniless at the time, appraised his situation and then with his violin under his arm strode into the Fountain Hotel, introduced himself to M. Lanson, the owner, and asked if dances were held there.

Receiving an affirmative answer, Mather snuggled the violin under his chin and started to play. An appreciative audience quickly gathered, obviously enjoying the impromptu concert. When the crowd appeared to be at its greatest, Mather stopped playing, then, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, he explained his predicament to the hotel owner. Lanson was sympathetic — he was also a lawyer of sorts, he told Mather, and offered to defend him without charge. Perhaps it was due to Lanson's oratory — more likely it was due to Mather's fiddle — but in any event Lanson won the case, and Mather went free.⁹

In the fall of 1860, John Mather was working in Painesville, Ohio. Only ninety miles away, in Titusville, Pennsylvania, the world's

⁸ The collodion that was flowed over the plate was generally prepared by mixing a solution of 55 grains of pyroxylin, 5 ounces of alcohol, and 5 ounces of ether, and in this 2 grains of cadmium bromide were dissolved. The silver nitrate solution generally consisted of 35 grains in 10 ounces of water.

⁹ *Oil and Gas Man's Magazine*, 668-69.

first commercial oil well had been struck a year earlier. Wells had sprung up wildly throughout Crawford and Venango counties, with the sudden search for oil spilling over into Clarion, Forest, and Warren counties in a very short time. Refineries came into being as the producing area expanded, and almost overnight men of all walks of life — from bankers to beggars — skilled and unskilled — the shy, sly, and slick — descended upon this isolated area like a swarm of locusts.

Mather heard of this exciting region from a Painesville friend, W. J. Hart, who had just been hired to operate the bar in the Eagle Hotel in Titusville. Messrs. Abbott and Current, proprietors of the American House in Painesville, had just leased the Eagle Hotel. Hart, well known to them, was their choice for the barman. In addition to pouring drinks he knew how to handle crowds, and equally important, their money. It's a good bet he knew how to handle his fists, too.

Hart, explaining his deal to Mather, asked John to go with him, emphasizing the fact that such a bustling region should afford good opportunity for an experienced photographer. Mather liked the idea, and he and Hart arrived in Titusville by stage late in the evening of October 4, 1860.

When they stepped down from the stage Mather's boots sank into the mud of Titusville up to his ankles. By his own choice Mather remained stuck in that town the rest of his life.

The new arrivals, wading through mud that almost pulled their boots off, finally checked in at the Eagle Hotel; the fortunate travelers, friends of the operators, were assigned a room in the Eagle annex along with only fifteen other men.

For the past two years Mather had been touring in rural America. Then, overnight, he was transported from the pastoral serenity of the midwest into a maelstrom of a raw, foul-smelling frontier where men breathed, talked, ate, and lived oil and nothing but oil. This previously bypassed frontier of northwestern Pennsylvania was beginning to have its day.

The smell of oil to the man lusting for money created in him the same heady sensation as copious quantities of French perfume — in the right places, of course — did for the man seeking romance. Indeed, the term romance is apt. The scent of crude oil created in many men such giddiness that they divorced themselves from their businesses, their professions, and their firesides, irresistibly drawn to the fountainhead of promise.

It took Mather several days to adjust to his new surroundings. Finally he approached Joe Connor, who operated a watch-repair shop

at the corner of Spring and Washington streets, and from him the photographer rented half his store space for twenty-three dollars a month, put in a skylight, set up his equipment, and opened for business. This was the first of four locations he would occupy in Titusville over the next half-century.¹⁰

From the outset Mather was dedicated to picturing the oil business and its growth. Nothing escaped his sharp eye and sharper lens. When new gushers blew in, he would be there as soon as his horse, or his floating studio on Oil Creek, could get him there. Well owners and lease superintendents were anxious to have their producing wells pictured for the people "back home" — and sometimes for worried stockholders and dividend seekers. The great and near-great all posed for Titusville's first permanent photographer. Their names read like a "Who's Who" of oildom. The classic, much published, portrait of Colonel Drake was made by Mather.

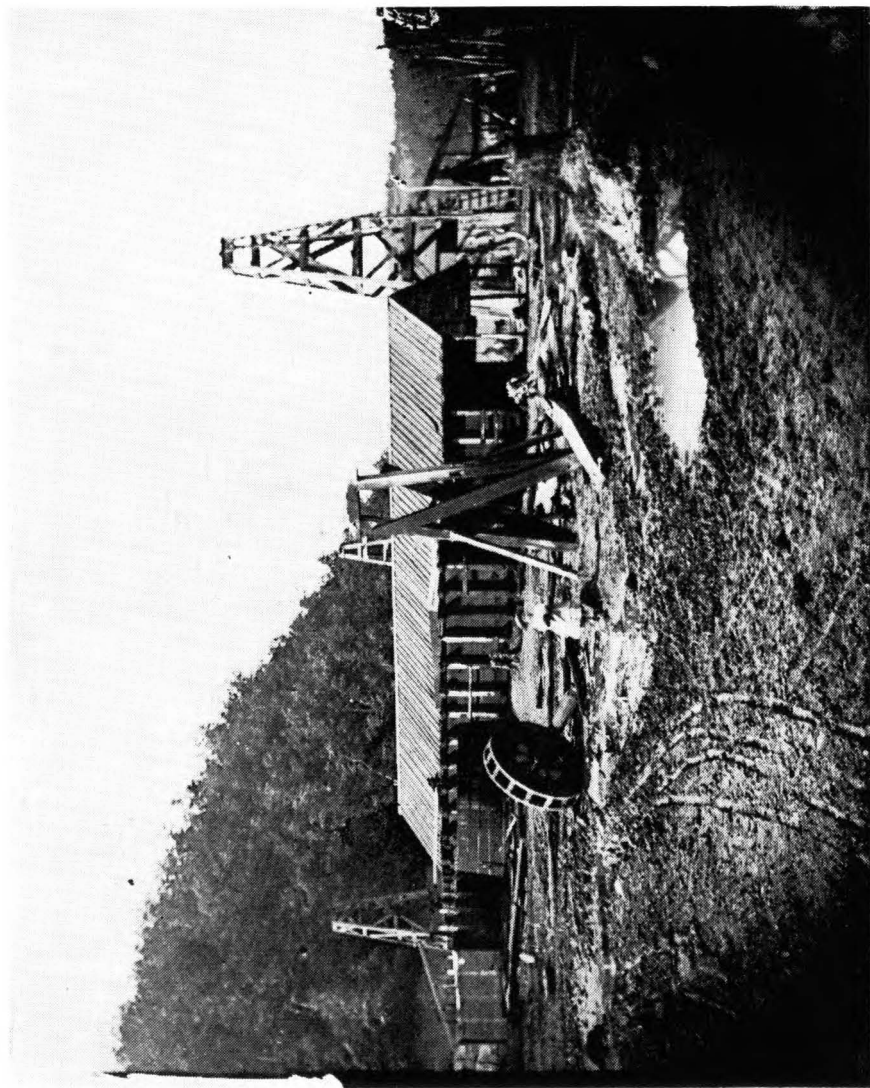
The lure of oil finally struck John Mather, and he planned to try his hand as a producer. His opportunity came suddenly when Joel W. Sherman, originally from Cleveland, who had a lease on the Foster Farm eight miles south of Titusville and bordering Oil Creek, started to sink a well. Sherman was putting it down by the arduous "spring-pole" method of drilling which consisted of a springy pole anchored at the base and supported by a fulcrum. The drill was attached to a rope hanging from the end of the pole, and a man or men, with feet in leather stirrups also attached to the rope, applied weight to lower the drill to the surface of the rock. As the pressure was released, the elastic pole lifted the drill again, and slowly the rock was powdered as the drill went gradually deeper and deeper.

Sherman soon exhausted himself, understandably, and could drill no deeper in this fashion. He found a friend who had a horse he was willing to trade for a sixteenth interest in the well. Sherman rigged a tumbling shaft and continued to drill by horse power but after several weeks, the horse, "Old Pete," petered out, and once again the work came to a halt. Sherman next located a small steam engine which he secured in exchange for another sixteenth interest in his hole. Using steam power hastened the drill downward, but soon all the coal was gone and so were the funds by which more could be purchased at a price of one dollar a bushel. In search for cash or coal, Sherman came into Titusville where the first person he saw whom he knew was John Mather.

10 Obituary, *Titusville* (Pa.) *Herald*, Aug. 24, 1915.



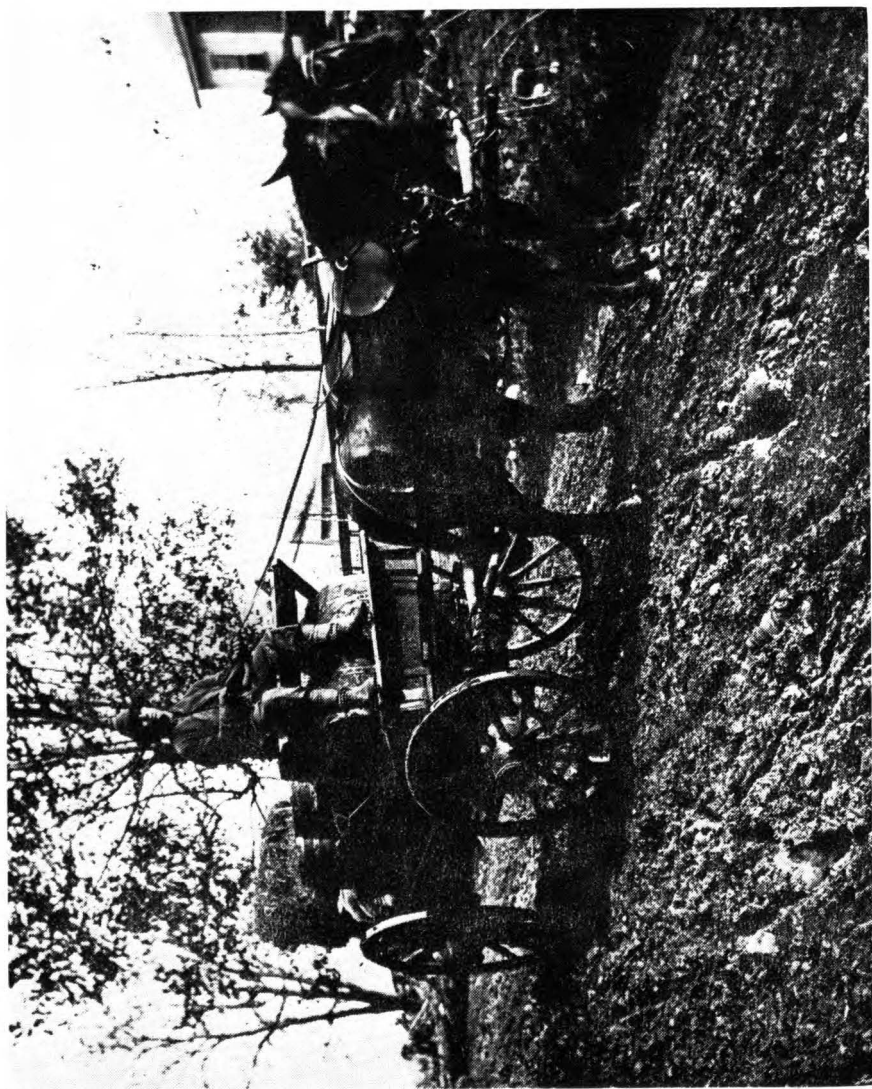
Peter Wilson and Colonel Drake at the Drake Well, 1861. Wilson, a Titusville druggist, was Drake's close friend. This is Drake's second derrick; the first one burned late in 1859 and no picture of it exists.



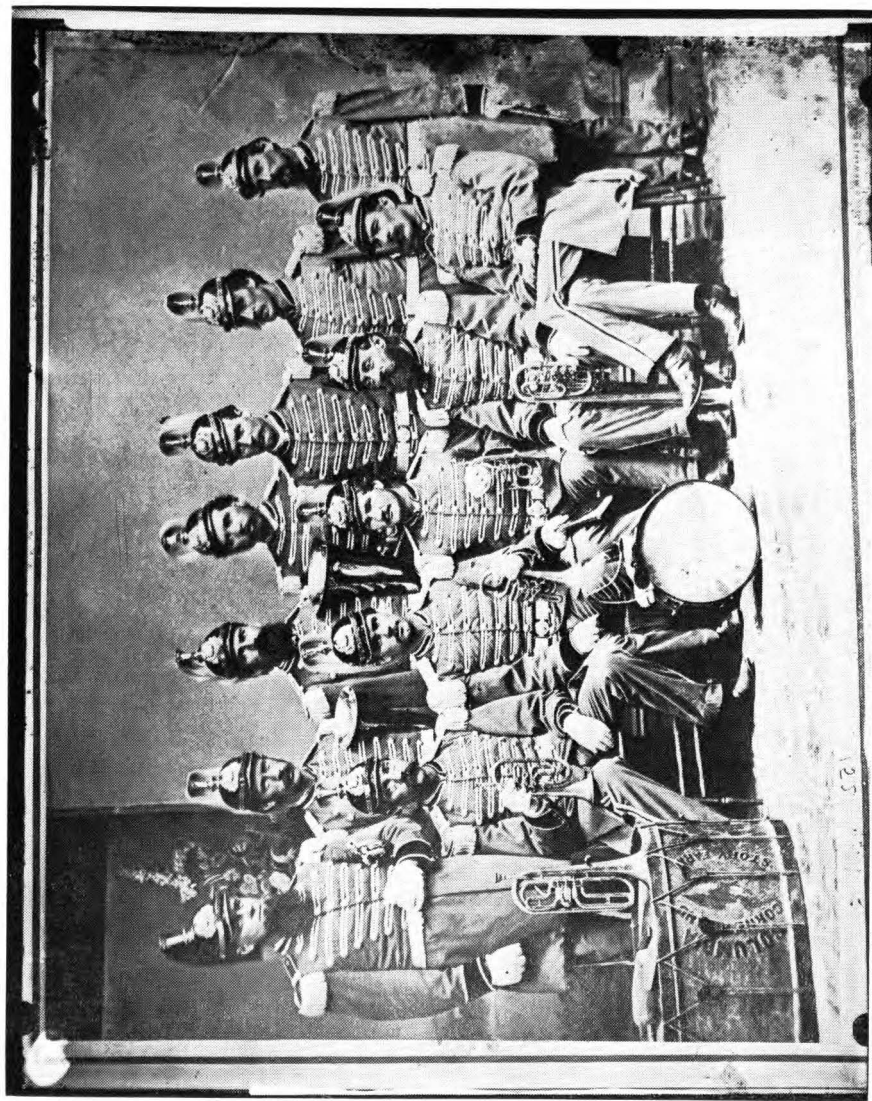
The Sherman Well. Mather made a dollar and lost a fortune by failing to invest in this well.



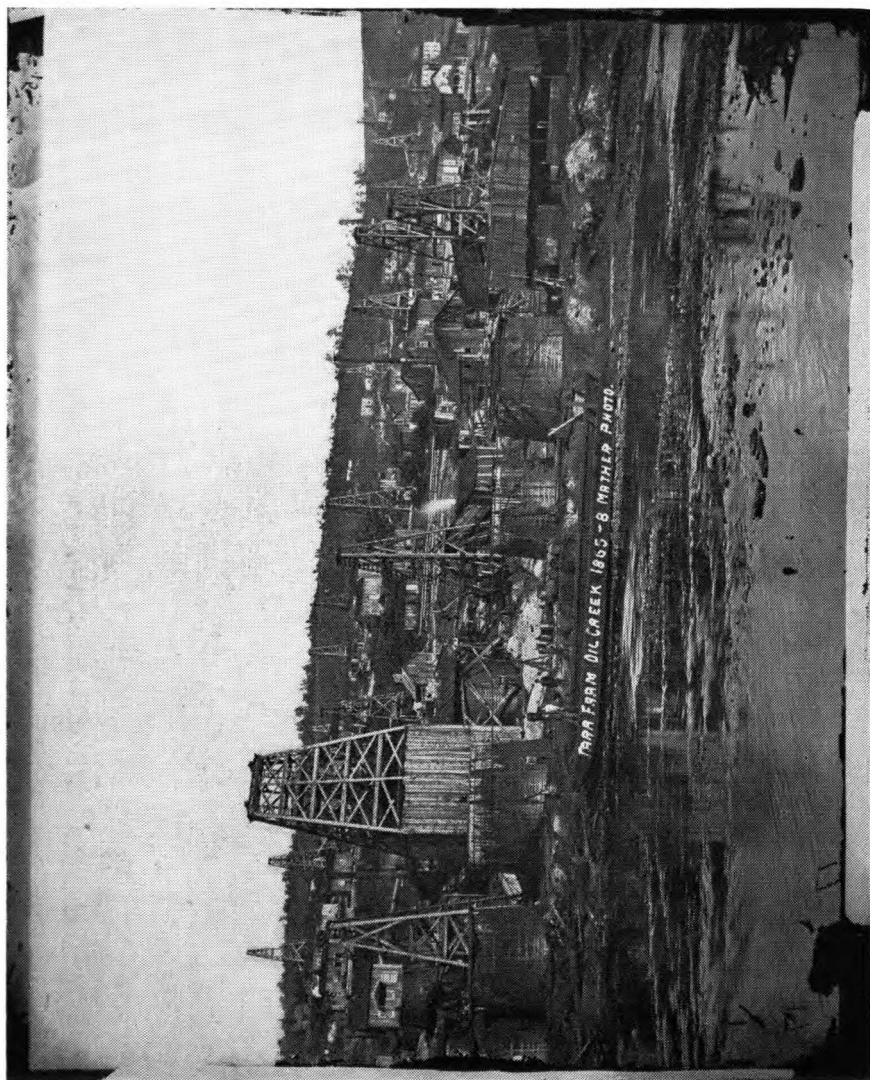
Tarr Farm Tea Party.



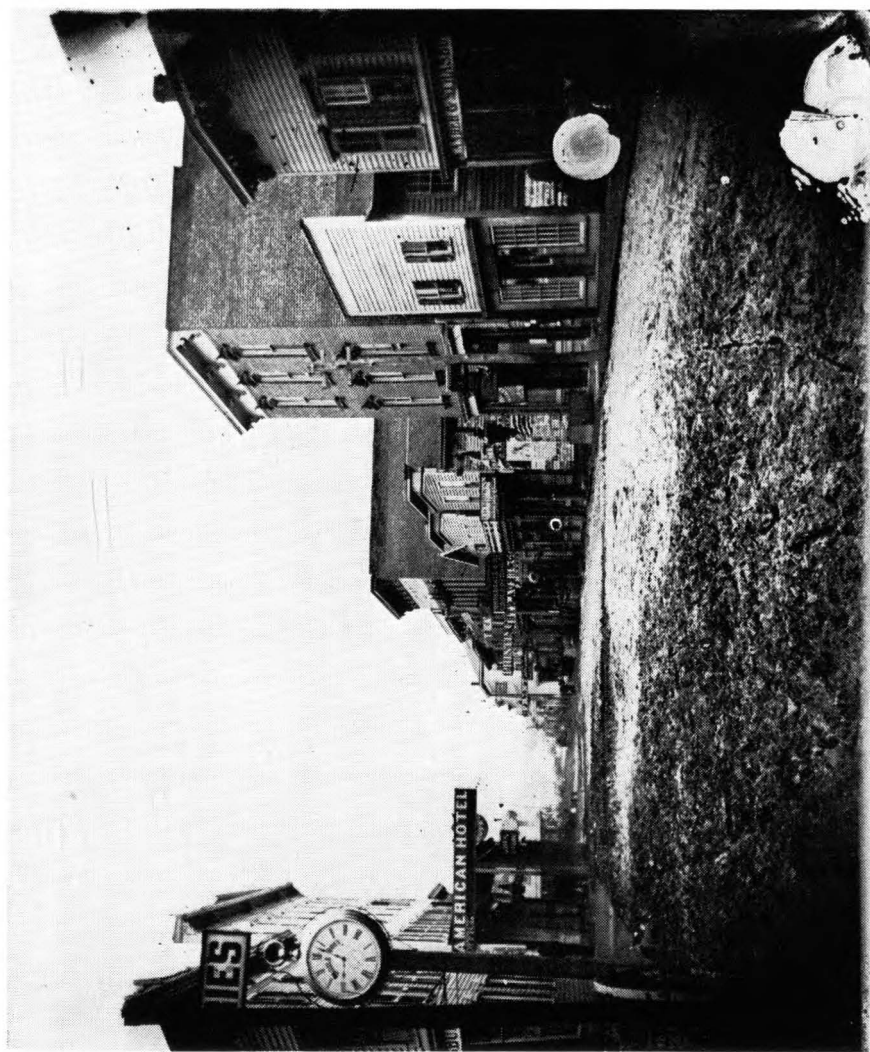
Typical Oil Region Teamster. These men virtually controlled the movement of crude oil until the advent of the pipeline, an advancement they opposed with open violence. The teamsters were a hardy lot; they had to fight mud and mules. Note the "gas tank" at the rear of the wagon!



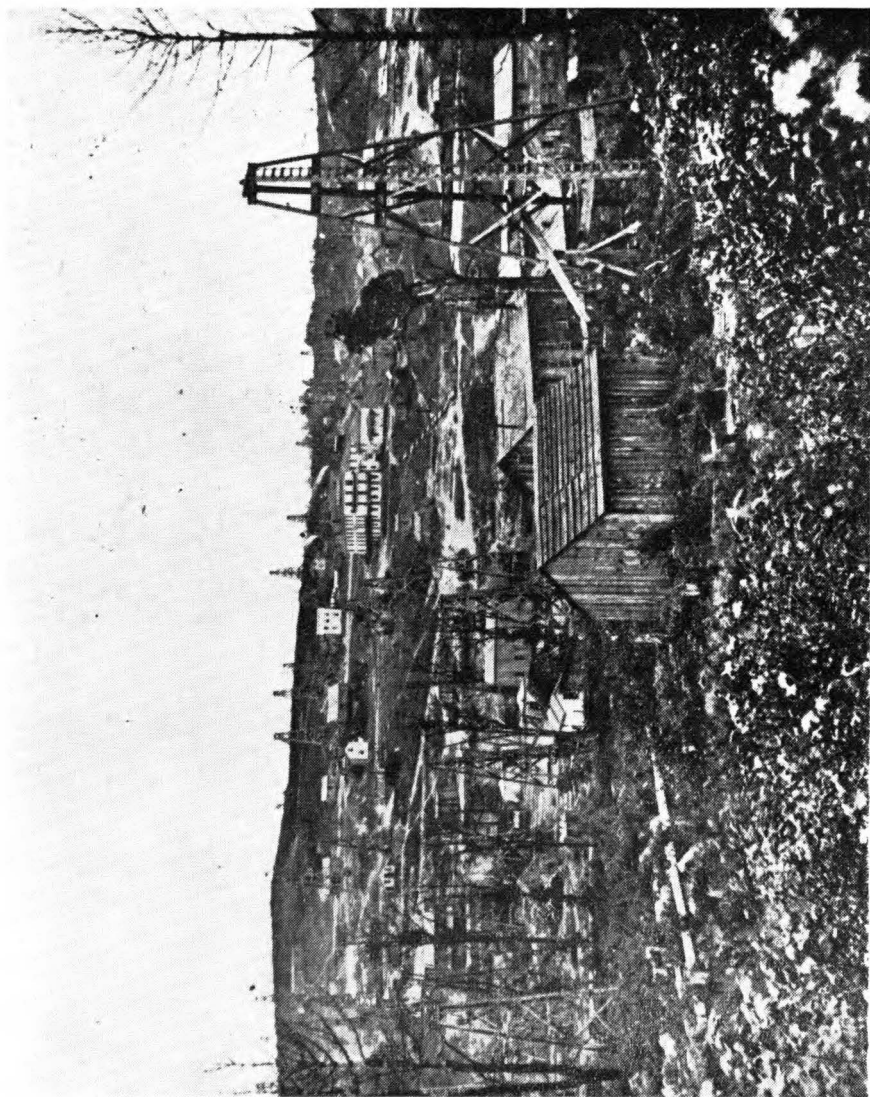
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Columbia Farm Band, Story Farm, on Oil Creek, 1867. The Columbia Farm was one of the best managed oil leases in the oil country.



Tarr Farm, Oil Creek, 1865. Flatboat used for transporting barrels of oil.



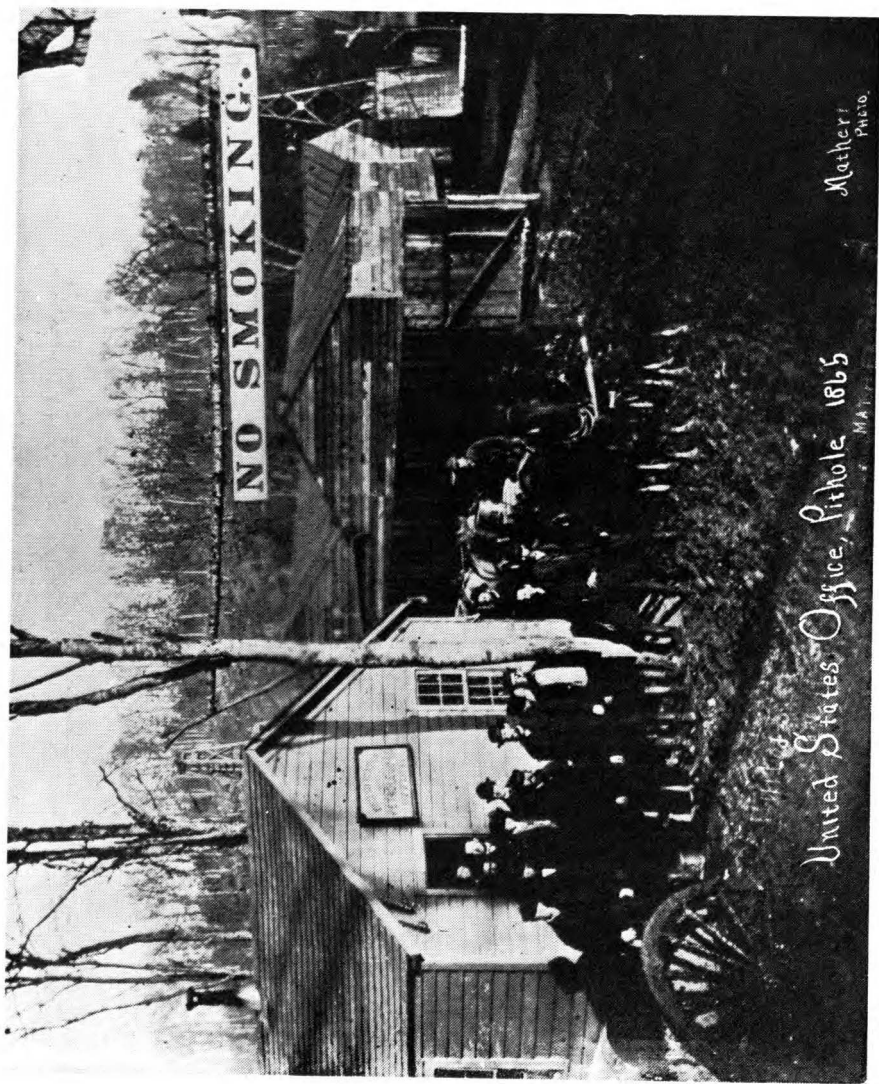
Spring Street, Titusville, 1865. Mud was common to all oil region towns.



General View of Pithole, 1865. Now a ghost town, this was farm land early in 1865 and a city of 15,000 people before the end of that year. During its lifetime, Pithole was a typical rough-and-tumble frontier town.



Duncan Street, Pithole. Jerry-built construction was typical of men more interested in making a dollar than in building a permanent residence.



United States Office, Pithole, 1865

*Mather
Photo.*

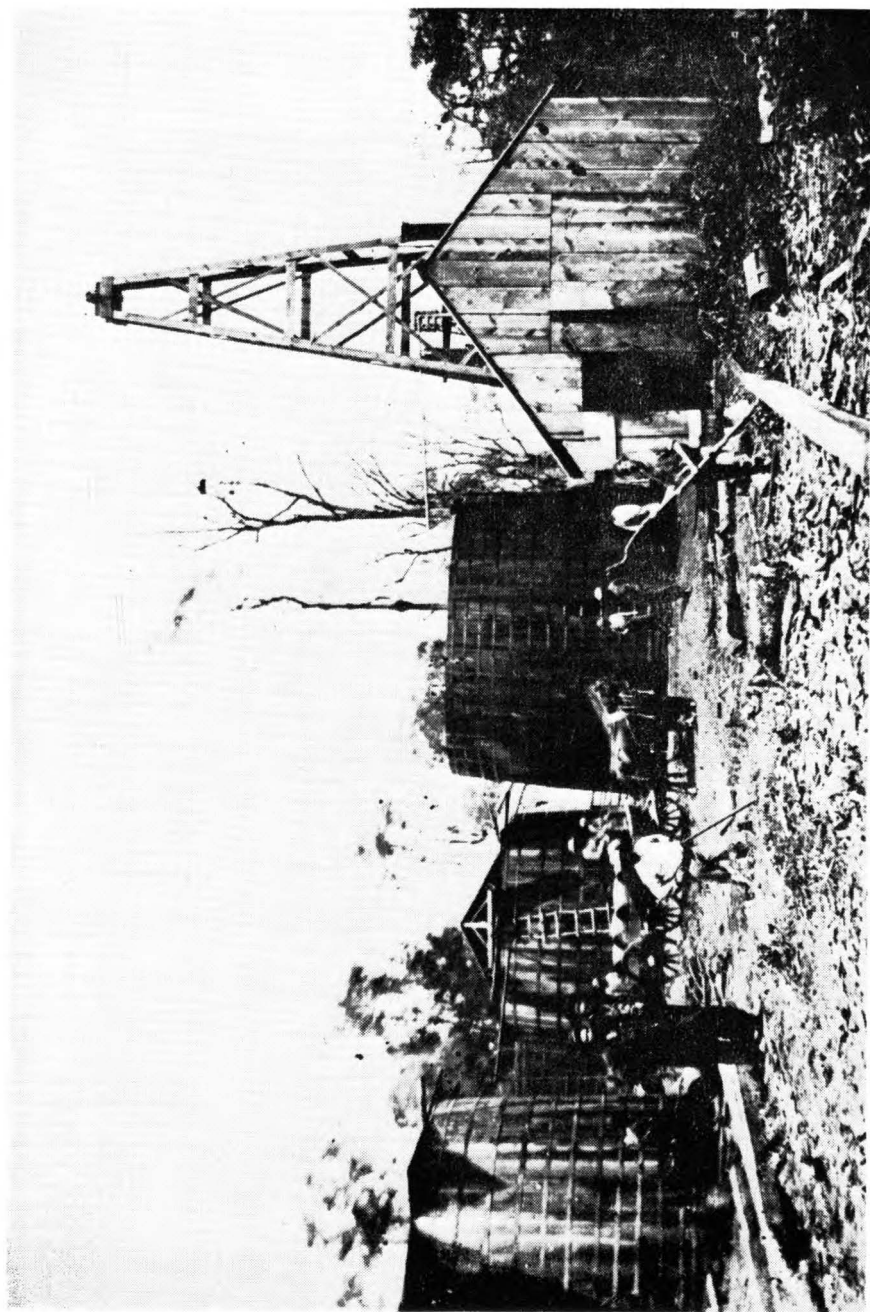
Office of the U.S. Petroleum Company, Pithole, 1865. This company owned the discovery well that led to the rush and creation of the town.



General View of Holmden Street, Pithole. The Danforth House is shown at the extreme right.



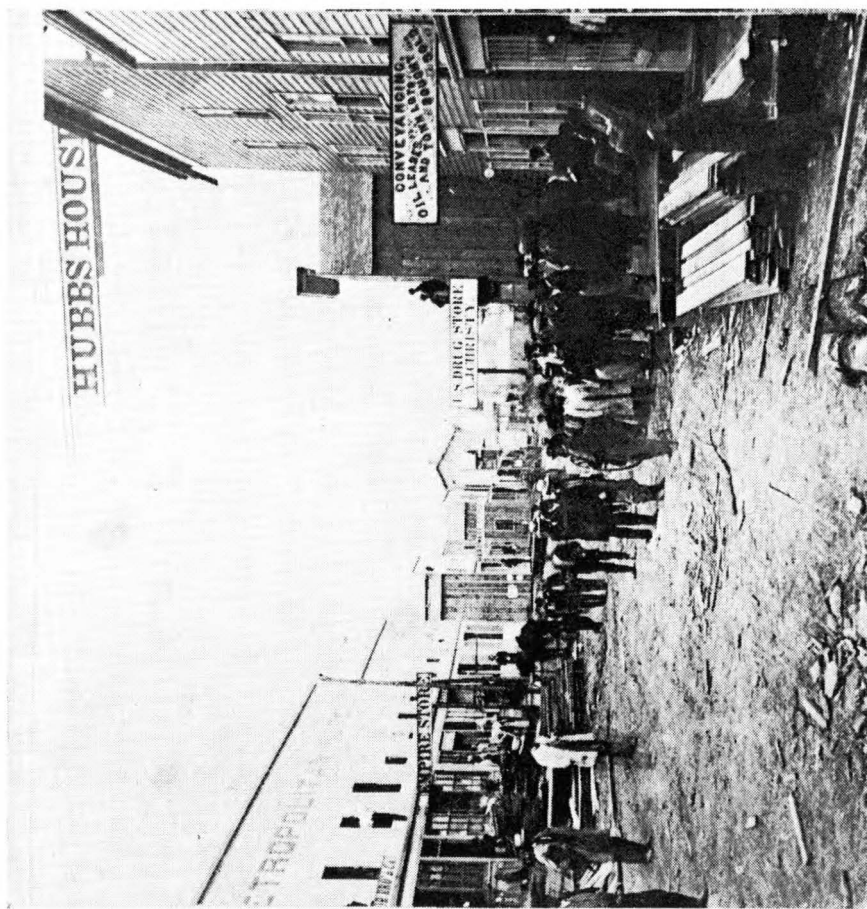
Pithole's Infamous Prather Street. This was oilom's worst "red light" district.



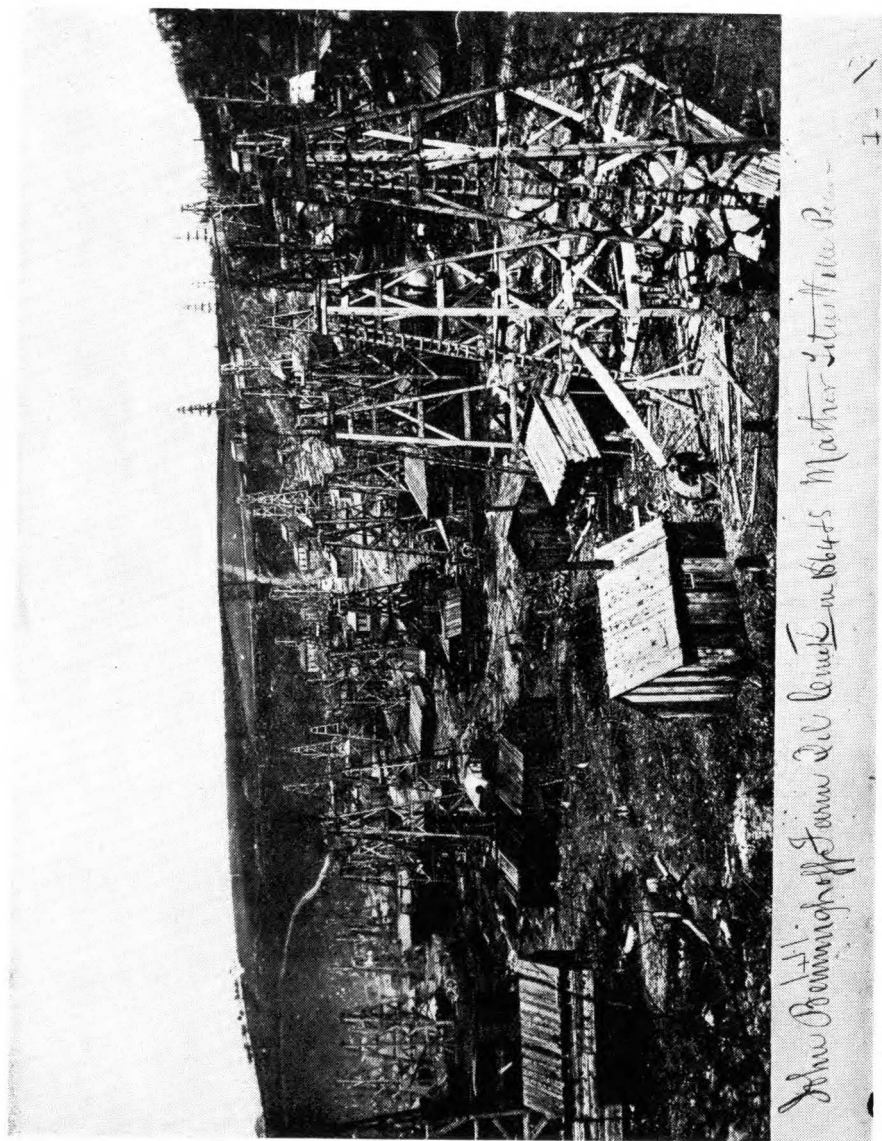
Homestead Well, Pithole, 1865. Struck in April 1865, it produced 50 barrels a day and later increased to ten times that amount. John Wilkes Booth owned an interest in this lease but sold it in 1864 before he left Franklin, Pennsylvania.



Early Type Tank Cars. Capacity of each tank was 45 barrels. Cattle-type cars, shown at the right, were used to transport oil in barrels; the open construction prevented gas accumulation and explosions.



Pithole Building Spree, 1865. The windows in the Metropolitan Hotel are still under construction.



John Benninghoff Farm, Oil Creek, 1864-65. This area was destroyed by lightning one hour after Mather took this picture.



BONTA HOUSE, PITHOLE, PA.

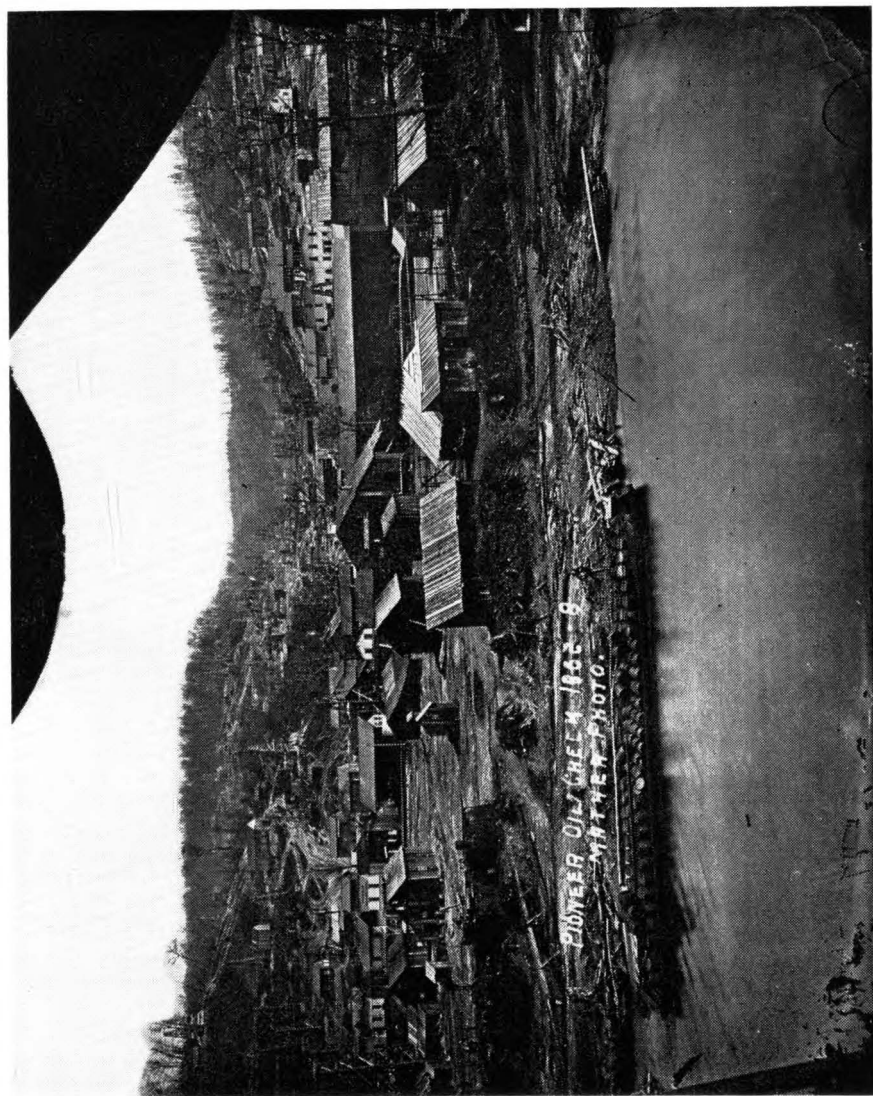
THIS PROPERTY will be given away on the 6th day of June, 1866. Price of tickets to the Concert \$10.00 each. Agents wanted in every Village and City.

J. W. BONTA, PITHOLE, PA.

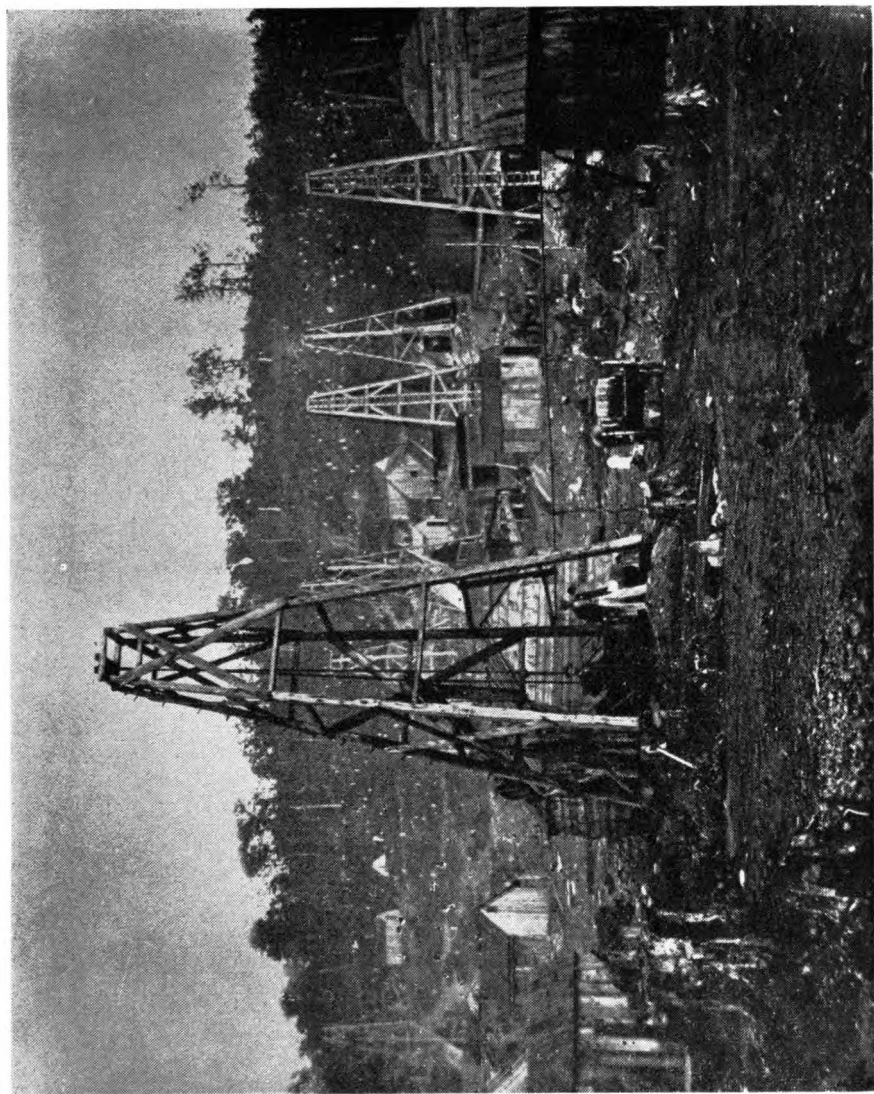
Bonta House, Pithole, 1866. This was one of Pithole's finest hotels.



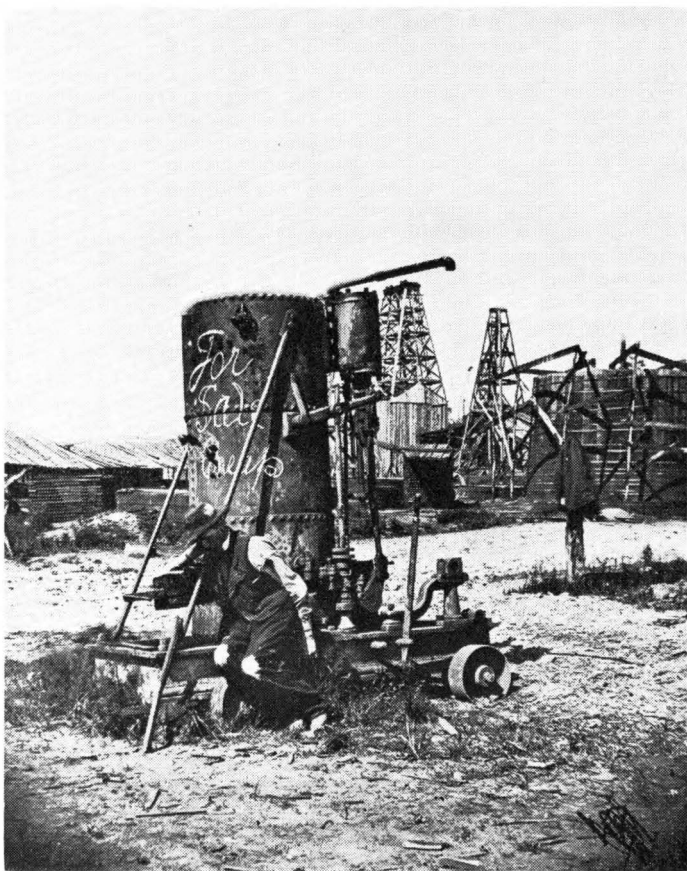
Petroleum Shaft at Petroleum Center, 1866. This was the second attempt to "mine" for oil and was unsuccessful; this is the only known picture of any of the attempts to mine for petroleum.



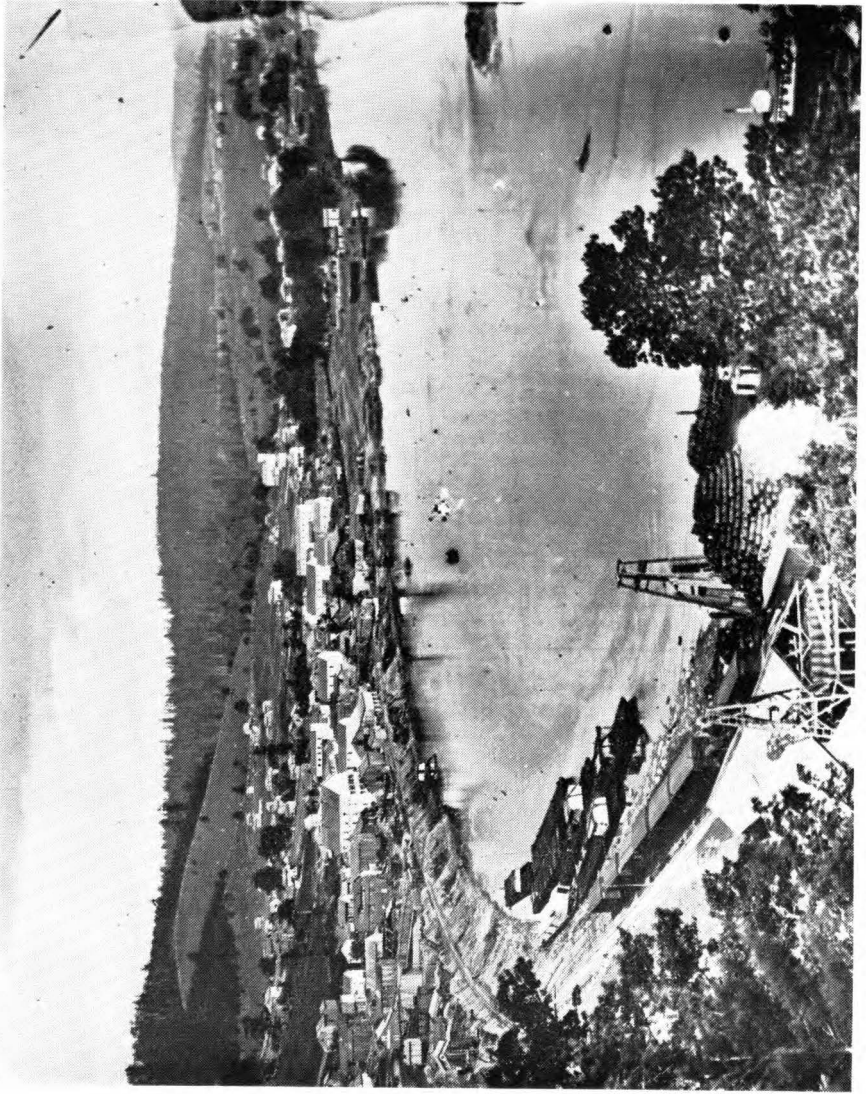
Pioneer, on Oil Creek, 1865. Contact print.



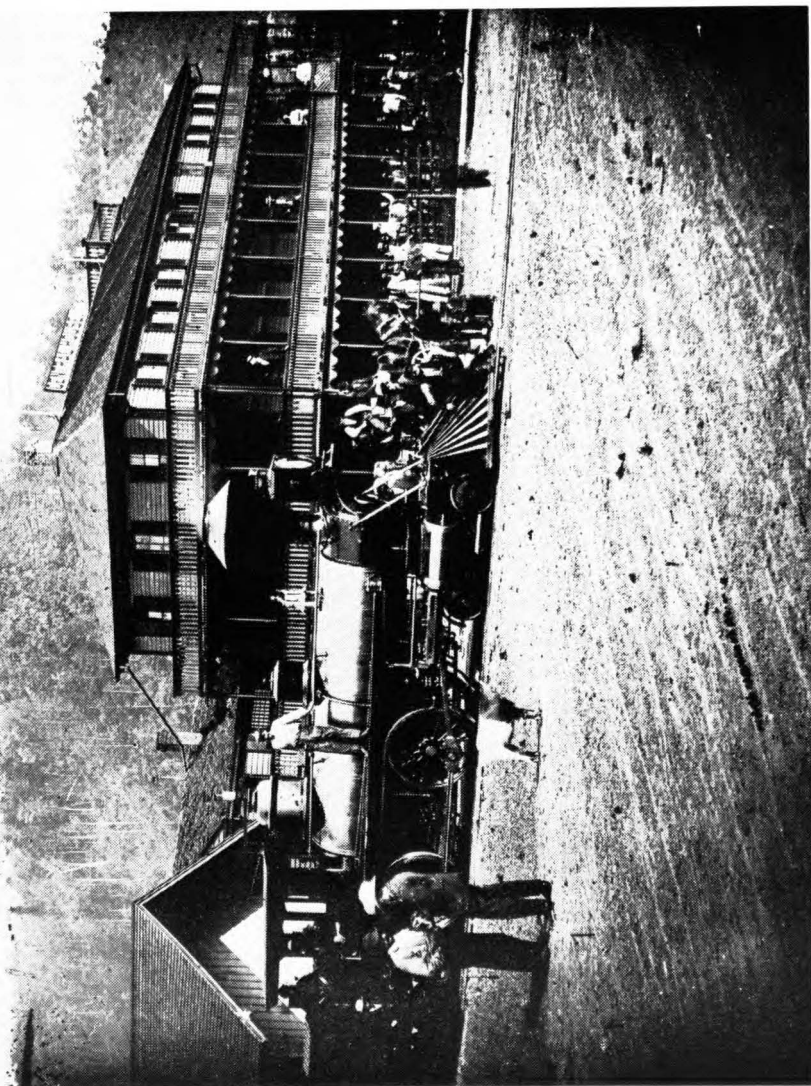
The Reed Well. This is the picture Mather was offered \$500 to destroy during the oil well torpedo litigation.



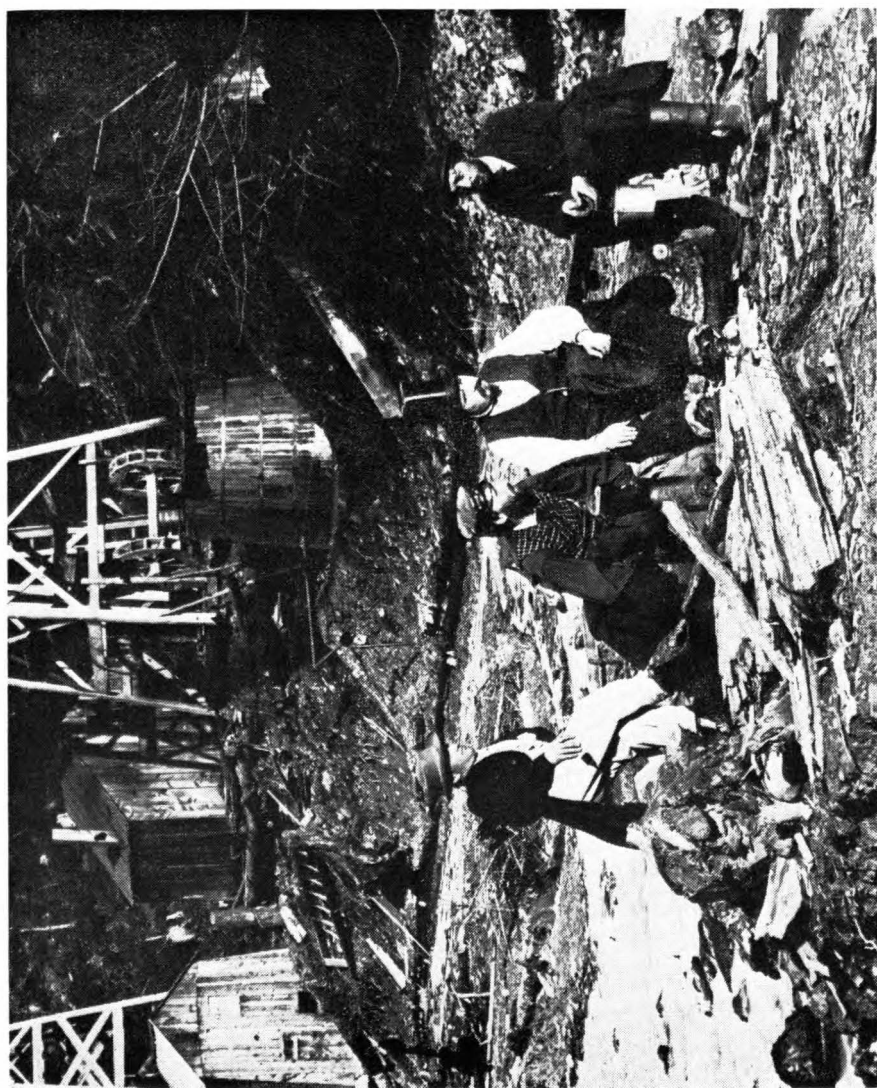
"For Sale Cheap." Not everyone succeeded in the rush for oil.



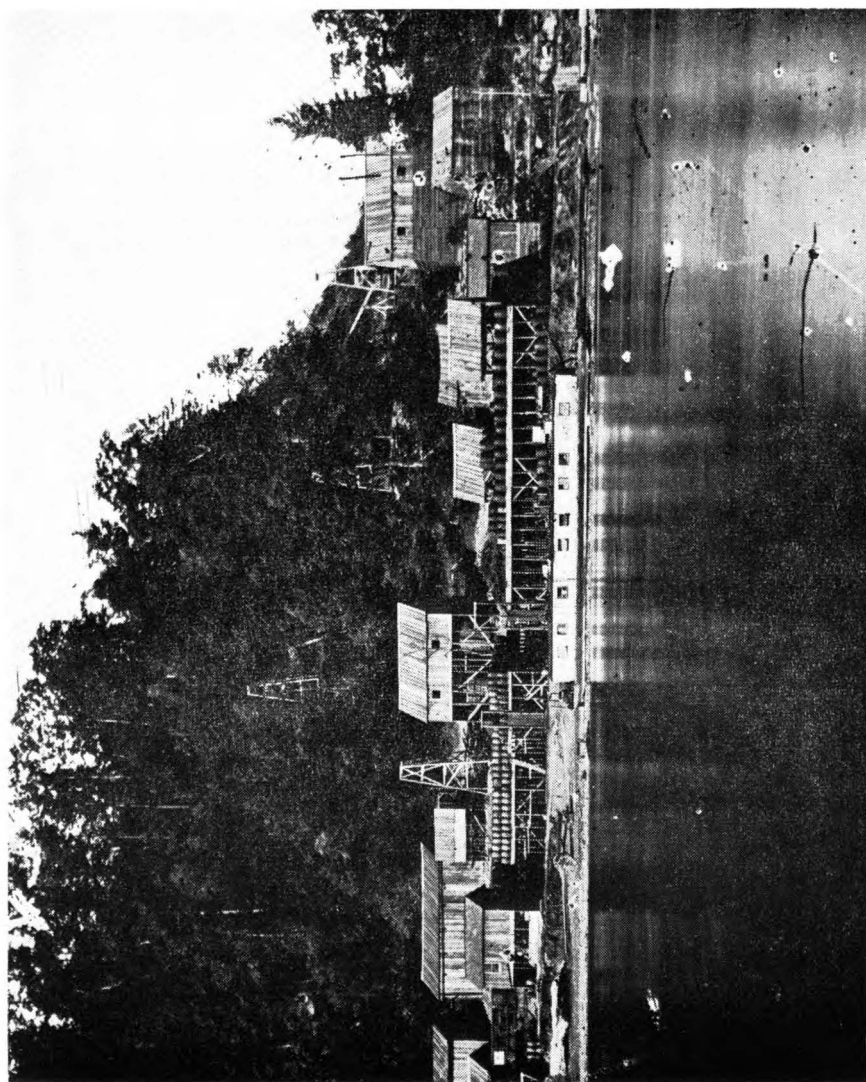
Allegheny River at Tidioute, 1867. Showing the railroad, flatboats, and barrel yards in a single panoramic view. Before petroleum this had been a famous lumber rafting point.



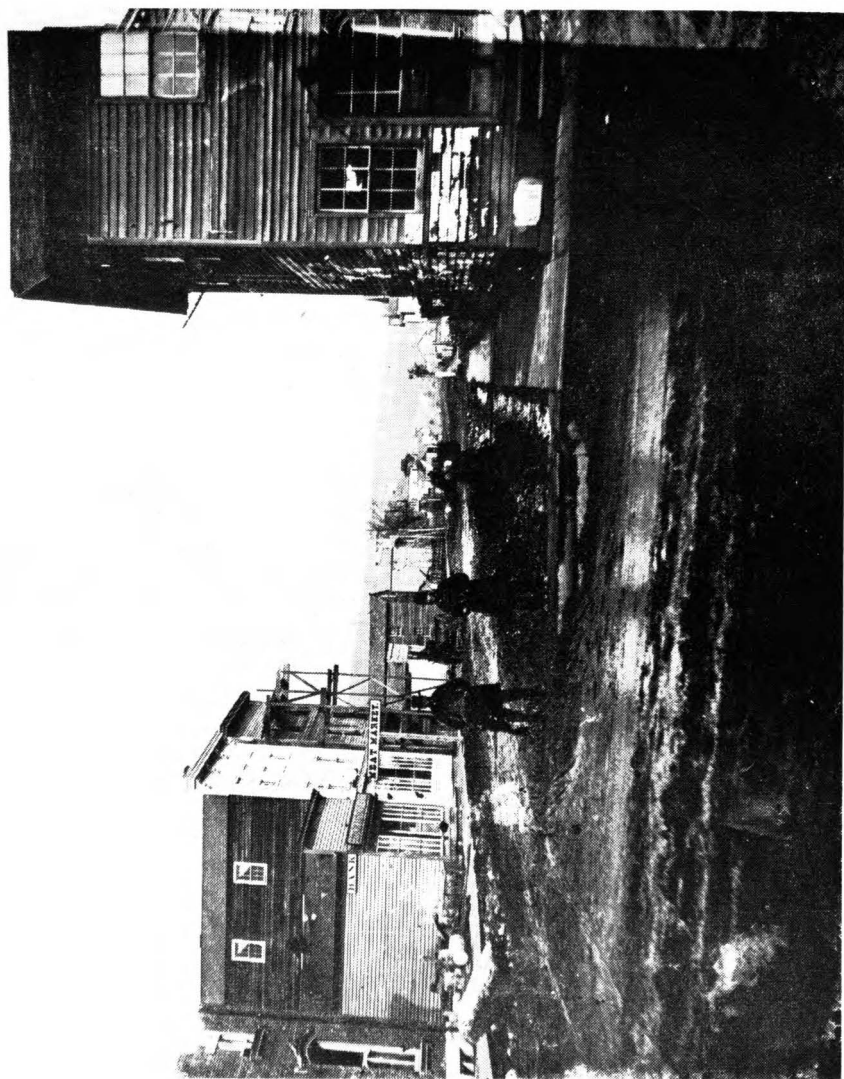
Oil Train Leaving Petroleum Centre.



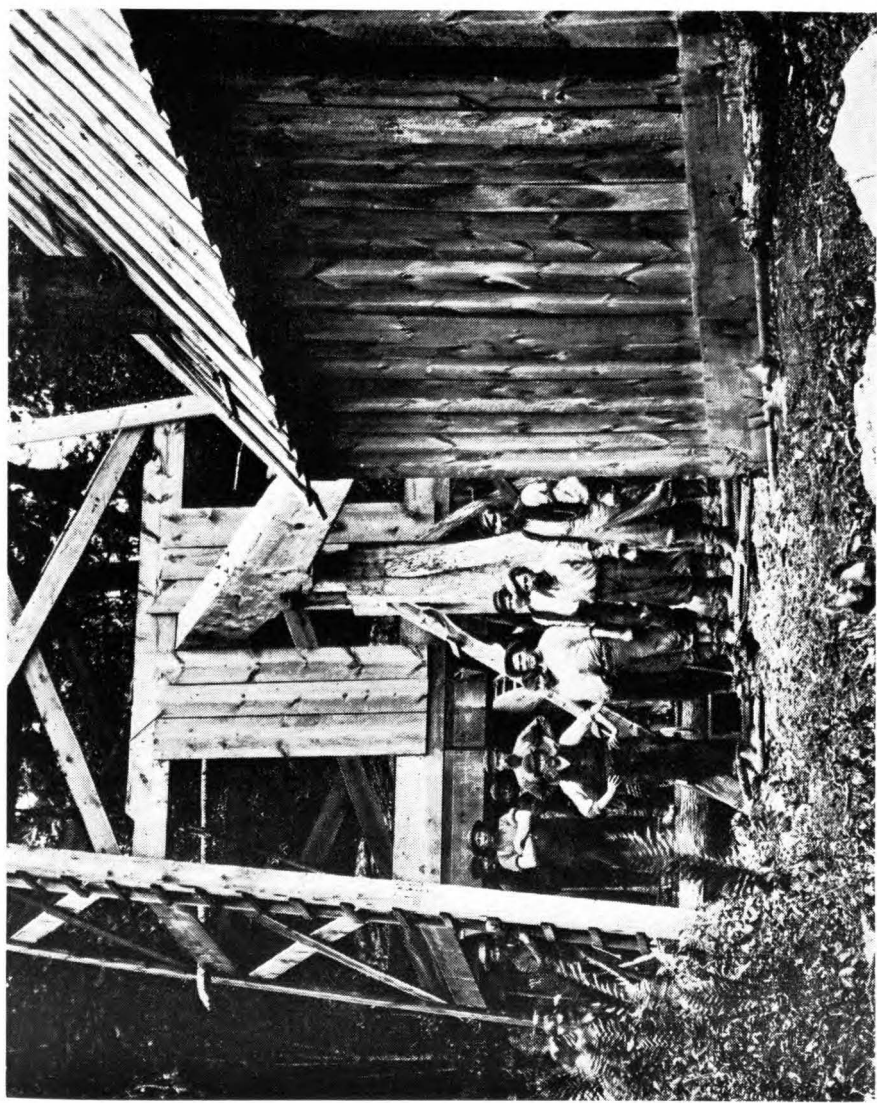
"Coffee Break." An unusual Mather shot along Dennis Run, Warren County. What's in that bucket?



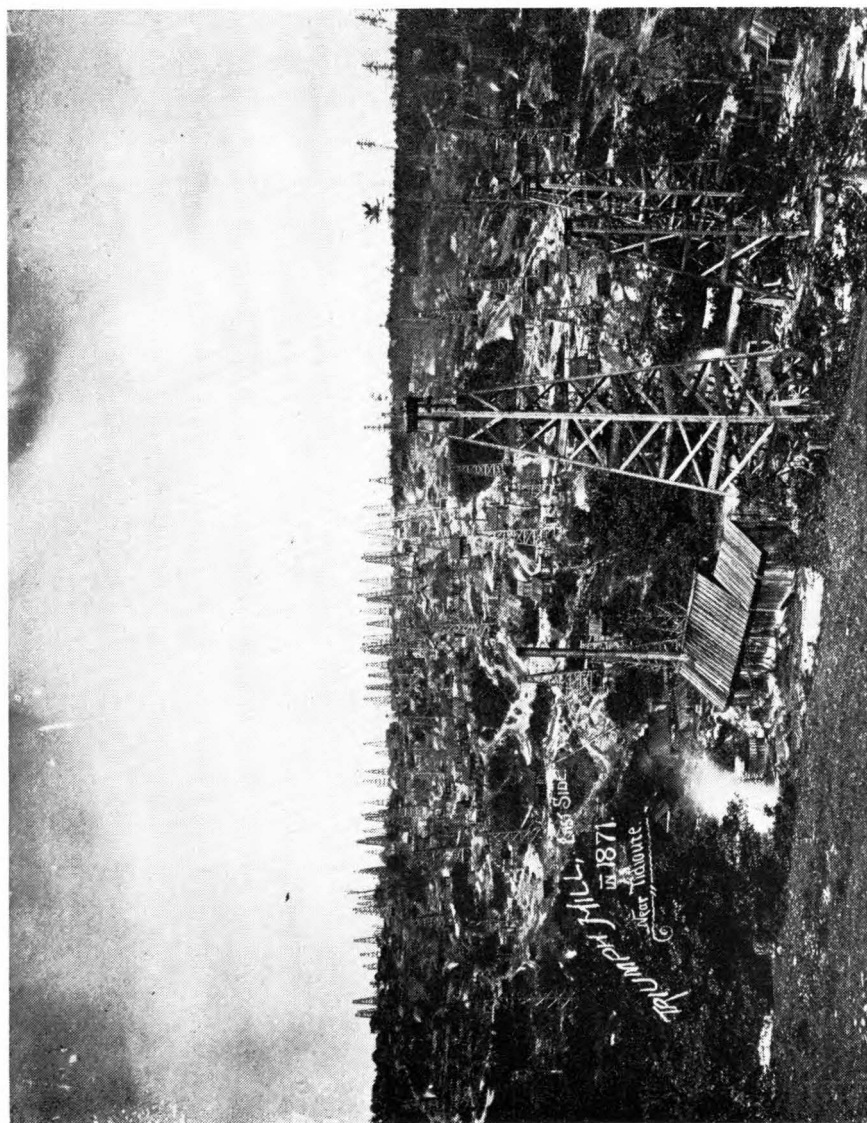
Barge Loading Terminal, Tidioute.



Washington Street in Titusville, 1867.



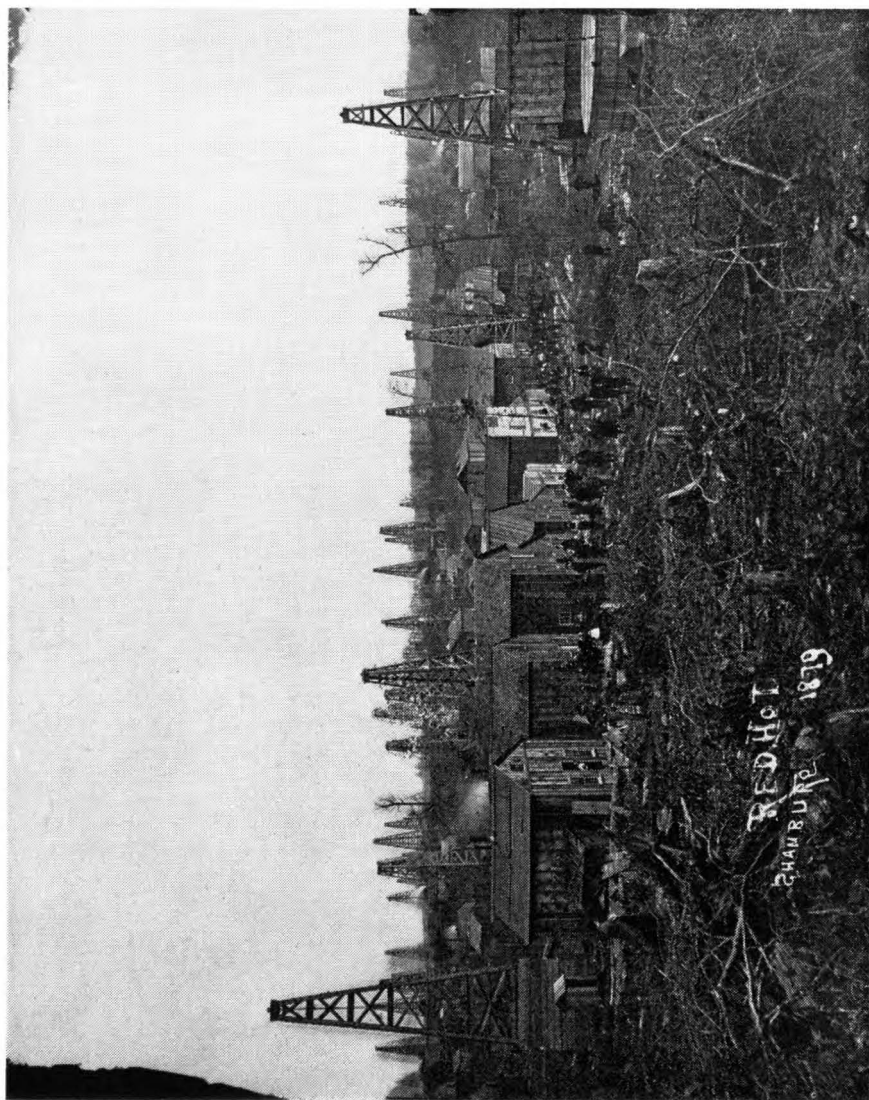
Dingley Run Near Tidioute, 1868. A superb Mather detailed photograph. The rig had just been constructed from new lumber. The "boss" at the right sports a heavy beard and gold watch chain.



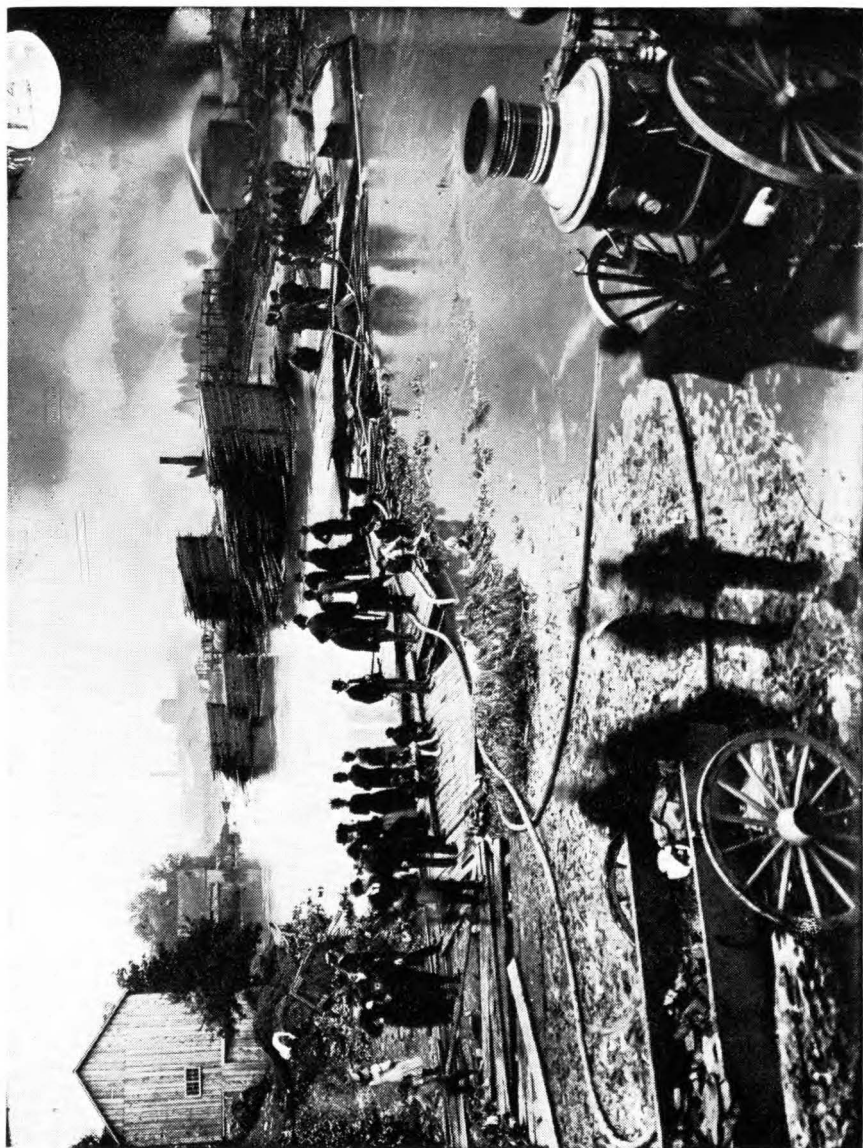
Triumph Hill Region, 1871. The profusion of derricks indicates how rich this oil territory was.



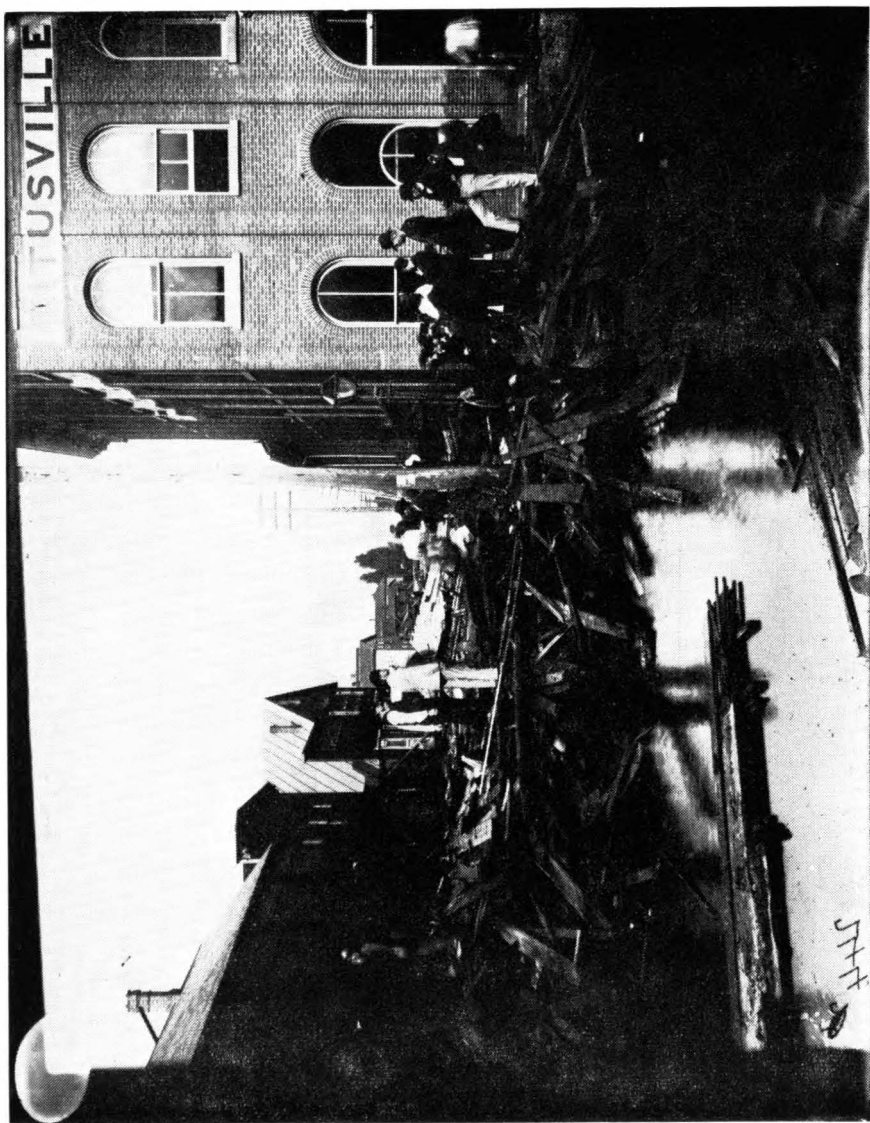
Spring Street, Titusville. Sign advertising Mather's gallery is conspicuous at extreme left.



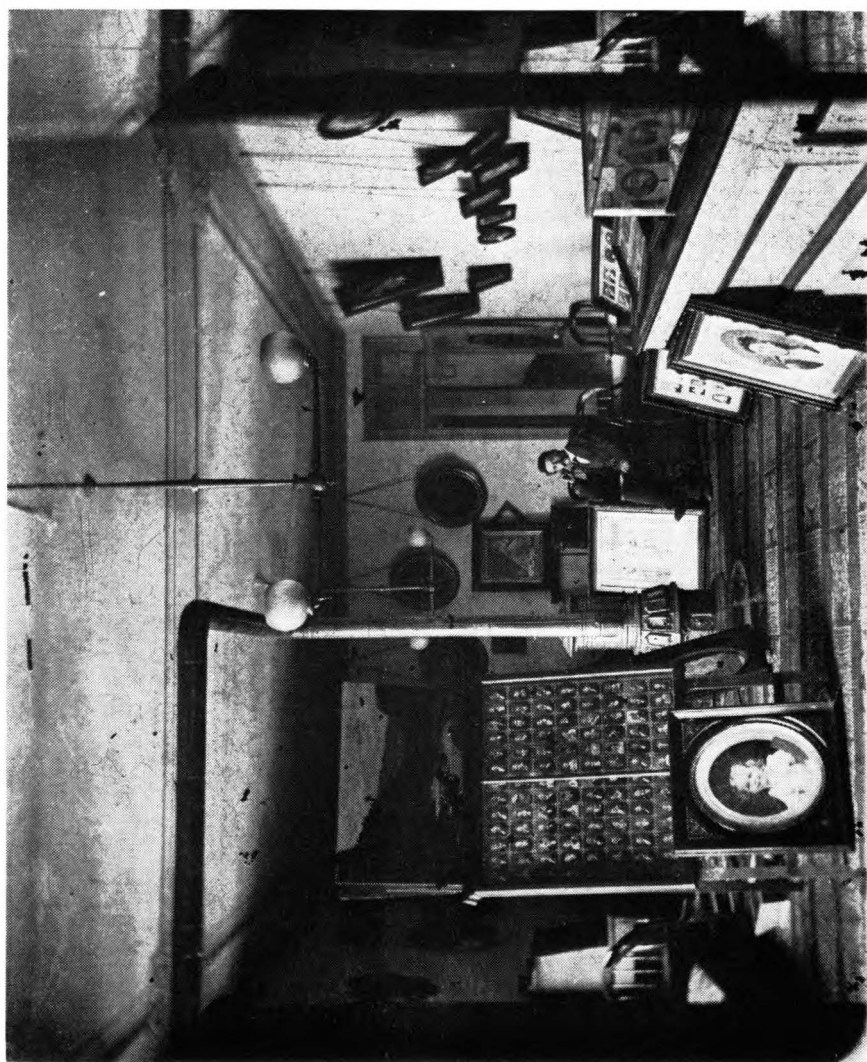
General View of the Red Hot Field, 1879.



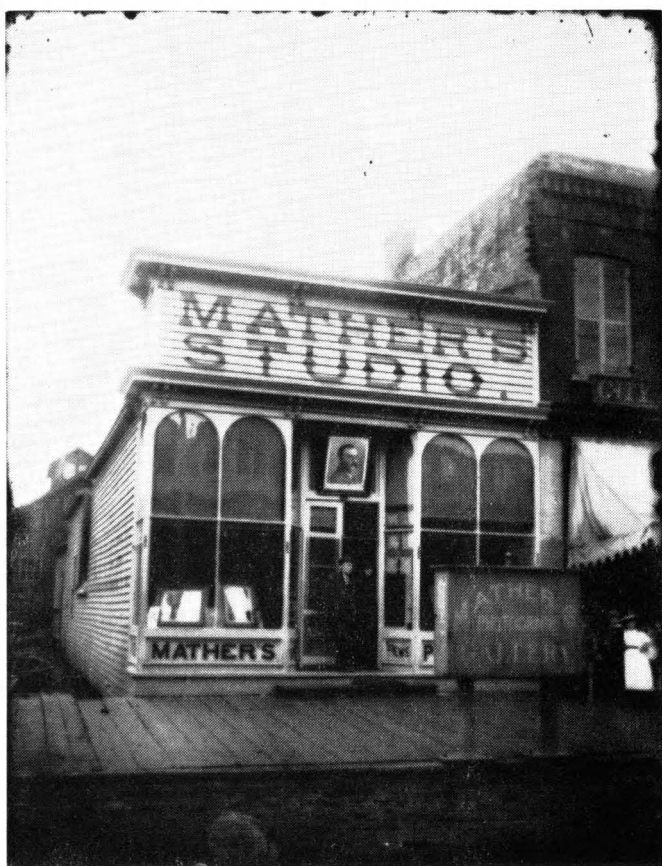
Fire and Flood, Titusville, 1892.



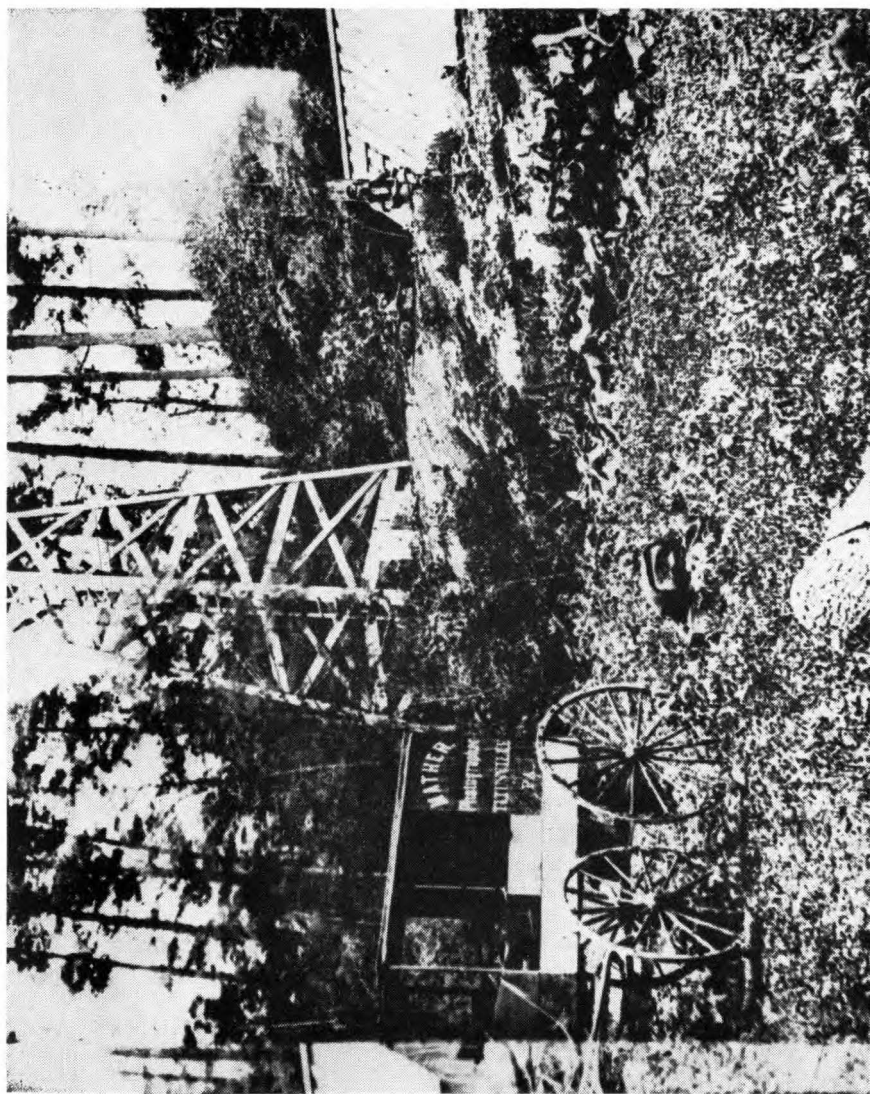
Titusville Debris, Fire and Flood, 1892. Mather lost 16,000 glass plate negatives in this disaster.



Interior of Mather's Studio, 1869.



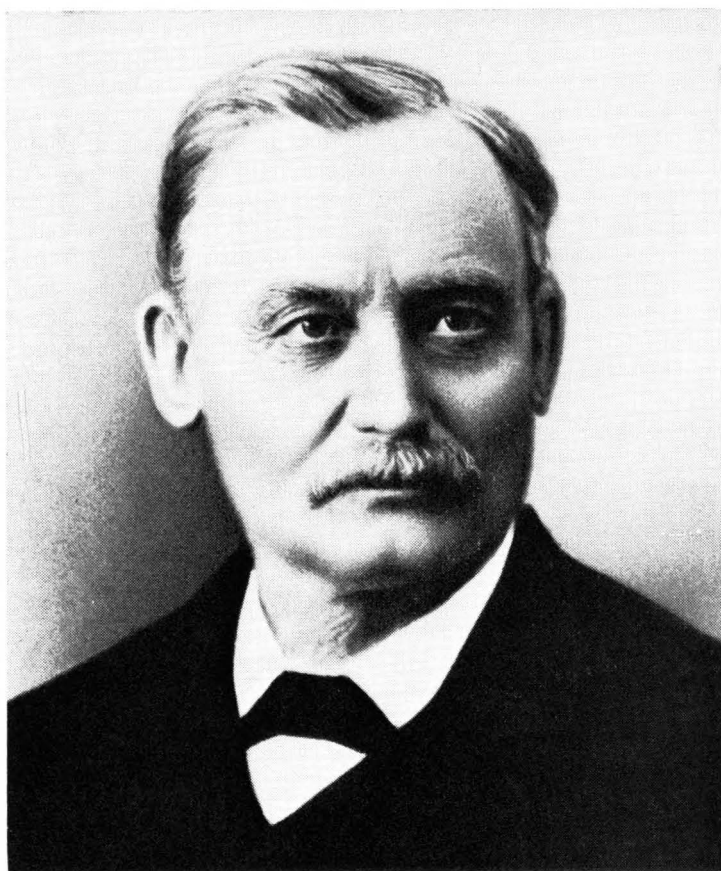
Mather's Gallery, 1887. Colonel Drake's portrait is in the left foreground.



Mather's photographic wagon.



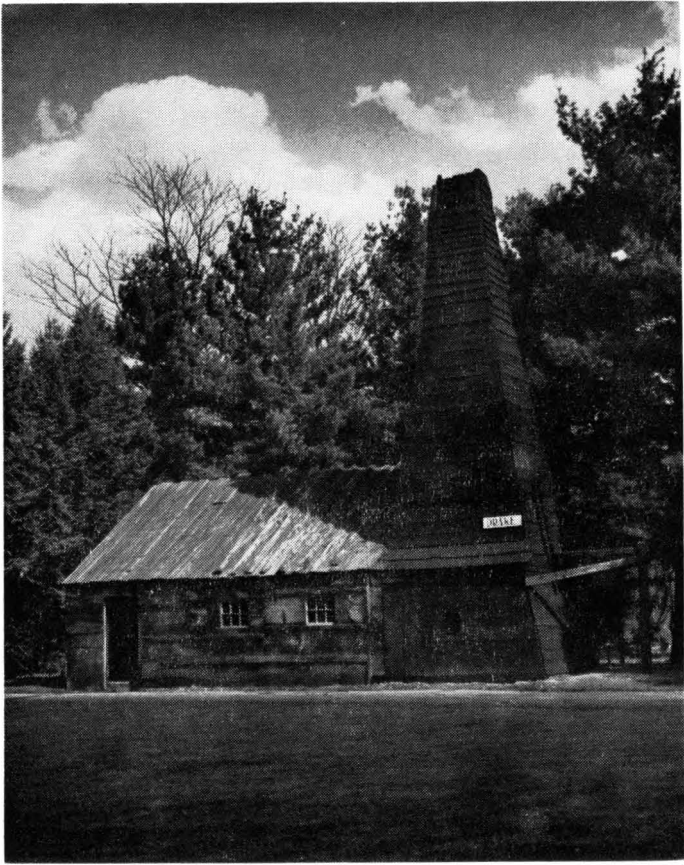
Mather's floating darkroom.



John A. Mather. Probably a self-portrait. Believed to have been Mather's favorite photograph.



Mrs. John A. Mather.



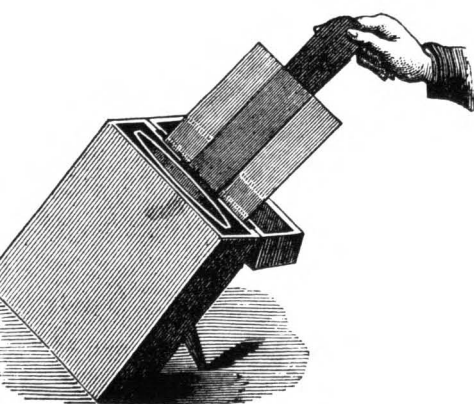
Replica of the Drake Well, focal point of the Drake Well Park Museum, Titusville. Photo by T. K. Stratton.



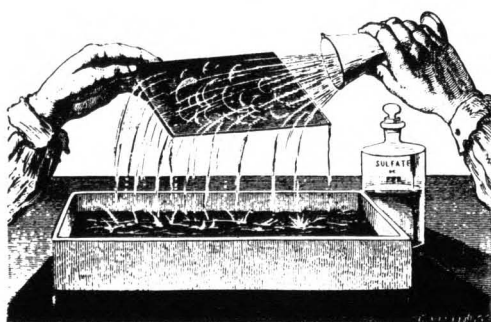
A. Polishing the Glass.



B. Coating the Plate.



C. Sensitizing Plate.



D. Developing Negative.

For one of the few times in his life, Mather had some extra money available and was going to invest with Sherman. Just as the deal was about to be completed, a woman came along with her child to have a portrait made of the toddler. Mather hurriedly took the photograph and came out to finish the arrangement with Sherman. The desperate driller had not waited, for meanwhile he had spotted another prospect and had talked him into trading sixty-eight dollars in cash and an old shotgun for still another sixteenth interest in the well.

The new coal supply generated a full head of steam in both Sherman and his boiler, and he kept drilling until the coal was almost gone. On its last downward stroke, the drill smashed into a vein of crude oil, and the well blew in at 1,500 barrels a day. The three men who had each traded something to Sherman for a sixteenth interest made out rather well as each sold his interest for \$175,000. It delivered approximately \$1,700,000 to its persistent owner. Mather at least had a sense of humor, and he told this story on himself to many friends and was even able to laugh about it.¹¹

The photographer enjoyed the crowds and excitement of the oil region, liked a bit of whiskey straight, and was a smoker of the best cigars. Nothing pleased him more than a dance or party, and he organized an orchestra and played at various festivities in the region. When the fabulous Oil Creek Railroad reached Shaffer, south of Titusville on Oil Creek, Mather's orchestra played at the Beldin Hotel in the gala celebration held July 4, 1864. Strangely enough, Mather never made a picture of his orchestra, or if he did, it was one of those plates lost in a later fire and flood. However, he did picture for posterity other musical outfits such as the famous Columbia Cornet Band composed of workers from the Columbia Farm Oil Company, a very profitable lease owned by a group of Pittsburgh men including Andrew Carnegie.¹²

Business in 1864, 1865, and 1866 must have been very good for Mather; they were the real boom years in the early oil region. Mather

11 J. T. Henry, *The Early and Later History of Petroleum* (Philadelphia, 1873), 224-25.

12 The Story Farm on Oil Creek was originally purchased by Pittsburgh men in 1859 for \$40,000. It was disappointing to its owners because of the depressed price of oil and in May 1861 they formed a joint stock company and named it the Columbia Oil Company. It had a capital of \$200,000 divided into 10,000 shares. Due to excellent management, the striking of good wells, and the increasing price for crude oil, during the last six months of 1863 the company paid \$300,000 in dividends or more than \$26 a share. At the end of the first six months of 1864, four dividends had been declared totaling 160%.

had by this time become well known, and his work was in demand at many places. He had accumulated some extra funds and again decided it might be worthwhile to "take a flyer" as an oil producer. In the fall of 1865, Mather combined with George M. Mowbray, one of the earliest oil chemists, J. J. Sutter, and John C. Goetshius, and this partnership operated a few wells on the Morey Farm at Pithole City. Fate proclaimed against them, and their wells were either dry holes or yielded so little that they were virtually worthless.

Again, and for the last time, Mather tried his hand as a petroleum producer. In 1869, he purchased the Morton well and lease located on the rich Walter Holmden Farm, bordering West Pithole Creek. Two new wells were drilled, and they were pumped for several years but then declined to marginal producers and finally failed to return the pumping costs. John Mather made no money from his oil ventures and ended up with the dubious honor of having operated one of the last wells at Pithole.¹³

Disaster struck in 1865. A great flood swept down the Allegheny River and Oil Creek. The rushing water lifted Mather's floating studio, carried it far down stream, and damaged it beyond recovery and repair. A new studio boat was constructed and put into operation as soon as possible.

The story of the attempt to bribe John Mather has appeared innumerable times in regional newspapers and magazines, and it deserves complete clarification. Colonel E. A. L. Roberts, the inventor of the oil well torpedo, had received a patent on it on November 20, 1866, and he took prompt legal action to halt those who were making and using torpedoes not manufactured by his firm, the Roberts Torpedo Company. Because of the prices charged by his company, which were considered excessively high by most oil producers, and the fact that he had a monopoly on the business, enmity against the Roberts company grew loud and angry.

In the summer and fall of 1863, William Reed, a successful oil producer, had exploded three experimental types of torpedoes in the Criswell well, but with doubtful results, and he did no further work towards improving them. In the fall of 1867, four years after the Reed detonations, and one year after Roberts was granted his patent, using Reed's experimental blasts as a basis, F. L. Munson of Reno, Pennsylvania, organized a group of infringers into the Reed Torpedo

13 Samuel P. Bates, *Our Country and Its People; a Historical and Memorable Record of Crawford County, Pennsylvania* (Boston, 1899), 400-1.

Company. In order to do this, he purchased from Reed his pretense of a patent with Reed signing a blank patent application, and Munson filled in the description with an alleged invention of his own. The new company requested an interference with Roberts's original patent and litigation commenced.

To avoid counter-injunctions and the rulings of the court, the Reed Torpedo Company suddenly switched all of its property to one William Hinds, and before Roberts could serve an injunction against Hinds, the business was again transferred to D. P. Pierce & Company. Later Pierce sold it to a Mr. Holbrook.

Sometime during the three years of prolonged legal action, someone approached John Mather and offered him \$500 to destroy the original plate he had of the Criswell well previously used experimentally by Reed. He refused in anger, doubtless loudly and openly, and was threatened with the statement that another photographer would be brought into Titusville to put him out of business.

Mather held his ground, and actually the negative, or a print from it, was never mentioned in the court wrangling. Finally the case was decided by Mr. Justice Grier in Philadelphia who ruled in favor of Roberts on every point and ordered a perpetual injunction against the infringers.¹⁴

Obviously the Reed Torpedo Company and those associated with it did not want Mather to destroy this negative as this evidence might have favored them if it had been used. Only Colonel Roberts and his company could have benefited in any way from such a destruction, yet the case Roberts had was tight as it was, and such an attempt to destroy evidence could have been difficult to explain if brought before the court. Did Roberts or one of his representatives ask John Mather to destroy this plate? No one can be absolutely certain today.

In later years Mather told this story and also explained that shortly a rival photographer did arrive in Titusville. After doing some hard thinking on the subject, Mather planned how to handle the newcomer. He invited him into his studio one day and offered to take his picture. After seating the photographer carefully and posing him correctly, Mather whipped from behind his back a new pistol-flash gun, nearly an exact replica of a real gun, pointed it at his victim, and proceeded to give him a strong lecture on the code of the oil country. Then, pretending he was going to shoot him, Mather snapped his new-fangled pistol-flash, the magnesium cartridge went off, and the nearly

14 *Derrick's Handbook of Petroleum* (Oil City, 1898), 1: 117.

crazed man leaped from his chair and rushed screaming from the studio. After that day he was never seen in Titusville again.¹⁵

In 1871, John Mather married Miss Martha Tarr, a handsome girl from nearby Cherry Tree and twenty-five years his junior. Their only child, Sara, was born to the couple September 8, 1872, and the Mathers saw to it that her education was enhanced by special musical training and extensive voice lessons.¹⁶

Sara and her mother dressed very well; they bought the latest and best in materials from Titusville merchants, and a seamstress made many of their dresses.¹⁷ Other dresses, shoes, and hats were purchased from the cities. Existing photographs show Mrs. Mather and her daughter in finery that was expensive by any standards. John lavished whatever he made on his family and many times more than he could well afford.¹⁸

Certainly John Mather's most unusual and most macabre picture was made in December 1878. Several months earlier, sixteen-year-old John Logan had died of typhoid fever in Warren, Pennsylvania, and was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery at Titusville where the family owned a lot.¹⁹ The grieving mother could not get over the fact that she had no picture of her son, and she became so ill over the matter that her husband, Stephen Logan, journeyed to Titusville and arranged to have his son exhumed. He hired Mather to take a picture of the body.

After the coffin had been dug up, Mather and his assistant, A. B. Rockwood, ordered it placed in an upright position, reclining against a hitching rail. They hurriedly set up the camera and then the upper portion of the coffin lid was removed, and Mather took two exposures as rapidly as he could. They both turned out exceptionally well, and the doting mother and her eccentric affection had been fully satisfied.²⁰

And now Mather entered a trying period in his life. In June 1892,

15 "John A. Mather—Oil Field Photographer," *Orange Disc Magazine* (Pittsburgh, May-June 1962), 23.

16 This information comes from an extensive interview with Mrs. Richard T. Jackson II, Mather's granddaughter, in Mar. 1962.

17 June 19, 1963 interview with John Oakleaf, a Titusville merchant, who knew all the Mathers.

18 Jackson interview.

19 *Warren* (Pa.) *Mail*, Oct. 18, 1878.

20 Unpublished manuscript by E. T. Stevenson, now owned by his son, James B. Stevenson, Titusville. The elder Mr. Stevenson, who preceded his son as editor of the *Titusville Herald*, collected this information from old-time residents in 1930.

a great flood, followed by fire, hit Titusville with a large loss of life and heavy property damage. Water ran more than five feet deep through Mather's studio, and he lost more than sixteen thousand glass negatives. This irreparable loss was not only a personal financial loss to the photographer but was a historical loss for future generations.²¹

In 1895, seeking more income, Mather selected some of his oil region views, enlarged them to 9¾-by-12½ inches, mounted them on heavy linen, and had a Titusville printery bind them into gold-stamped, green fibre coverings. He wrote an introductory paragraph for the volume, which contained twelve pictures, and he sold the books far and wide. But he did not sell enough of them, the results were disappointing, and a proposed second volume never did materialize. Today, dealers in Americana sell the volume for about twenty-five dollars when copies are found.²²

About 1900, Mrs. Mather developed serious eye trouble and went to Philadelphia accompanied by her daughter. She received electrical treatments from a specialist there, but they did not help her. While in Philadelphia, the two women stayed at a boardinghouse not far from the hospital where the treatments were given. Residing there was Mr. Willard Hunt, a widower with seven children; Hunt and Sara Mather became good friends, fell in love, and were soon married.²³

Mrs. Mather eventually returned to Titusville but was never well again. In July 1904, she had a paralytic stroke, later contracted typhoid, and lingered on until September 24.²⁴ Her death left John Mather a weary old man, seventy-five years old, worn out, with his only relative his daughter who lived in Philadelphia.

After the death of his wife, Mather worked very little. He seemingly lost interest, and besides, young and progressive photographers had invaded Titusville as competition.²⁵ Most of his close friends were either dead or had moved to other locations in their ceaseless search for crude oil.

By 1912, Mather was a sick man. Robert A. Locke, a college student at that time, recalls that while on vacation that year, he and a friend assisted Mather to inspect his negatives. The plates were stored in a small second-floor room of the Mather house, and as they were

21 *Titusville Herald*, June 5, 1942.

22 The Drake Well Museum has six copies of Mather's photographic book; none have the same twelve photographs in them. The complete title of the book is *Mather's Historical Oil Region Views of Western Pennsylvania*.

23 Jackson interview.

24 *Titusville Herald*, July 15, Sep. 26, 1904.

25 Jackson, Oakleaf interviews.

very heavy, the floor had started to sag. Mather had rented part of the house and had to move the negatives. The two boys arranged a gadget in his living room through which he could look at the plates as they held them up to the light, while the old man sat in a comfortable chair and identified them. Those he regarded of little value were destroyed, and the others were listed in a notebook. The work was never fully completed because the photographer fell ill and was sick until after the students had to return to school.²⁶

John Mather recognized the value of his work on petroleum. He tried to sell his collection to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, but there was no money available for such a purchase. Later, he offered them as a gift to the Reverend Albert E. Broadhurst, his pastor, but the minister had no place to store the heavy burden and did not know what to do with the negatives so he politely refused them.

On July 14, 1915, Mather was well enough to attend an Old Home Week celebration at Petroleum Center, a former oil town where he had done much work. It was to be his last outing. Shortly afterwards he became ill and did not recover; he died in the Titusville City Hospital on August 23, 1915, of a cerebral hemorrhage and was buried next to his wife in the small, rural, and today unkempt Oakland Cemetery near Dempseytown.

He died without a will and without funds, nearly forgotten, and just short of eighty-six years of age. His friend, Mr. Broadhurst, conducted the funeral, and members of the Masonic lodge of which he was a member attended in a body.

The Drake Well Memorial Association finally purchased his negatives for \$100, and when the Drake Well Memorial Park was established just outside of Titusville in 1934, the negatives were placed there where they surely belong. John Mather would be happy to know that today his work stands supreme as a pictorial history of the petroleum industry he watched as it grew up.

Each year the Drake Well Museum fills dozens of requests for prints from the Mather collection. While utmost care is used, repeated handling adds to the deterioration of the glass plates. Recognizing this hazard and aware of the pricelessness of the negatives, the American Petroleum Institute had the collection put on microfilm in 1955. The microfilm workmanship was not of the best, and it did not do justice to the quality and character of Mather's work. It now seems certain that microfilming will be done again. This will be a task that petroleum historians will applaud and future generations will be grateful for.

²⁶ June 10, 1963 interview with Robert A. Locke.