ing information about a relative unknown in American business history — is vitiated by the author's excessive praise for a man and a company with obvious flaws.

Department of History
State University of New York
Fredonia, New York


This is the eighth book on the early oil industry and its development written by Ernest C. Miller. This work represents the melding of the author's two primary commitments: the petroleum industry and the region of his long-time residence, Warren County. Professor William C. Darrah, in the foreword to his book, Pithole — The Vanished City (Gettysburg, Pa., 1972), expresses his gratitude "to Mr. Ernest C. Miller of Warren, Pennsylvania, an oil man and first-rate historian of the petroleum industry."

Miller succeeds in placing Warren County into more prominent historic perspective in the history of the petroleum industry. Much confusion has resulted from the fact that the first successfully drilled oil wells occurred at the meeting point of three counties in northwest Pennsylvania — Crawford, Venango, and Warren counties. While Titusville, situated at the southeast tip of Crawford County, has been universally cited as the site of the first oil strike, Colonel Edwin L. Drake "struck oil" on August 27, 1859, in a field about a mile southeast of the city in the northeast sector of Venango County, where the Drake Well Museum now stands. The southwest corner of Warren County abuts the eastern Crawford County line just above Titusville, while its southern boundary borders on northeastern Venango County. What Miller adequately points out is that much of the most intense oil drilling activity in the tumultuous early decades of the mid-nineteenth century occurred in northern Venango and southern Warren counties.

Titusville does, however, lay proper claim to the site of the first refining process. According to Miller: "The earliest refinery in northwest Pennsylvania was erected by William H. Abbott and his partners at Titusville, Pennsylvania, late in 1860 and the first run of crude oil made in it on January 23, 1861" (p. 25).
Yet the credit for the original use of petroleum, bottled commercially for medicinal purposes, belongs to Warren County. As Miller notes: "Doubtless the first white entrepreneur to penetrate Warren County and carry on business was Nathaniel Carey who collected crude oil and peddled it throughout northwestern Pennsylvania. . . . He is claimed to have introduced petroleum to the Pittsburgh merchants as early as 1790" (p. 4). The oil was skimmed off from oil streams and called "Seneca Oil" for the Indians who occupied the Warren County area.

Very shortly after Colonel Drake's "strike," a burst of drilling activity developed around Tidioute, some seventeen miles north of Titusville on the west bank of the Allegheny River in southwest Warren County. As Miller reports: "In Warren County the biggest drilling activity centered at Tidioute and by July 1860, more than 60 wells were being drilled" (p. 15). In addition: "Well before the year 1860 was over, Warren County men formed the Tidioute and Warren Oil Company, probably the first formally organized oil company in the county, and possibly the first in the nation following Drake's well" (p. 28).

Also of historic interest is the fact that Warren County may have been the scene of the development of the precursor of the Diesel engine. Miller writes: "An experiment was tried in an engine of the Warren & Franklin Railroad at Irvineton . . . in the summer of 1867. The specially equipped engine tried oil as the source of fuel and was very successful; the engine generated steam rapidly and maintained full pressure while running. This was surely the forerunner of the modern Diesel locomotive engine operating on Diesel fuel, a close-cut kerosene product" (p. 35).

It was Warren County that benefited from the demise of Pithole. Miller explains: "The greatest oil extracted came about the middle of 1866, just as the famous Pithole field was failing. . . . Many of Pithole's oilmen left the region and headed for Warren County. . . . By the end of the year, the Tidioute and Warren oil tract . . . was producing 2,700 barrels a day" (p. 35).

And the reformist nineteenth-century "trust buster" could have learned something from Warren County oilmen. Oil enterpriser John D. Rockefeller of Cleveland joined other refinery and railroad entrepreneurs to gain control of the inactive South Improvement Company that "had wide powers, enabling it to do most anything." The company tried to "raise the shipping price of oil from 87¢ a barrel to $2.14" (p. 41).
Miller reveals, however: "Warren County producers were the first to protest; at a meeting held at Tidioute... county producers proposed ways to combat the South Improvement plan:... that we agree and recommend, in connection with other producers of the oil region, to shut down our wells so long as may be necessary to thwart the designs of the monopoly... the next week over 3000 producers attended a meeting at Titusville... and organized the Producers' Protective Association to fight the plot." Consequently: "agents of the South Improvement group were unable to buy crude even though offering premium prices, and the railroads found themselves with no oil freight to move. The Commonwealth quickly repealed the charter of the company, the railroads cancelled their agreement with the refiners, and the oil country went mad in a victory dance and celebration" (p. 41).

Contrary to the "boom-town to ghost-town" phenomenon that afflicted Pithole and much of the oil kingdom, the oil industry prospered in Warren County. The author concludes: "From 1875 to 1900, it was hardly possible to read Warren newspapers without being told of new wells and new production and the gradual expansion of the Warren field" (p. 47).

But the specter of Pithole finally drifted into Warren County. The year 1882 began with the oil industry in the doldrums wrought by greed, speculation, reckless subleasing, and overdrilling. Yet by mid-year Cherry Grove Township in northern Warren County, six miles west of Sheffield, was to become "the most famous field ever found in the County." The Buffalo Express headlined it as "The Largest Well on Earth." The Cherry Grove well was drilled "over 2000 feet deep" and, by May 23, brought forth "a gusher yielding 2000 barrels a day" (pp. 49-50).

Within three months, five pipeline companies completed lines that shipped out 40,000 barrels a day from Cherry Grove. Teamsters earned $20 a day. Yet the flood of oil so overwhelmed the refining and tanker capacity that overflowing tanks spilt their oil into the creek and "Tionesta Creek... flowed oil" (p. 77).

But by 1883 the bubble had burst. The author notes: "Black Friday came on November 17, the market tumbled down to 90¢ a barrel... the regional loss was over $5 million" (p. 80). Also: "Real estate values collapsed;... lots costing $15,000... became nearly worthless." Finally, "drillers and speculators departed, most to Forest County where the Cooper tract was being explored" (p. 81).

Miller writes the epitaph: "But Cherry Grove carved a niche
for itself in the eternal record book of petroleum; the amazing output from this narrow cigar-shaped territory of 2,270 acres has never been equalled in any region producing Pennsylvania crude oil” (p. 82). Yet lesser wells continued producing oil, and oil refining continues to play a vital role in the Warren County economy.

The book concludes with an interesting historic review of the success story of the independent well-to-pump United Refining Company which was created in Warren in 1902. The company continues to prosper despite adversities wrought by the Depression, postwar retrenchment, and national government policies to which the firm responded with management flexibility and creative adjustment. Miller has done extensive research on this well documented tribute to oil history and to Warren County.

Department of History and Political Science
University of Pittsburgh at Titusville
Titusville, Pennsylvania

Michael J. Zavacky