
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

The 'Lion' in June: the Titusville Flood of 1892

By Christopher Sepesy

SPRING weather in western Pennsylvania, as in much of the Middle Atlantic region, can present some of the best examples of the March "lion and lamb" theory. Sometimes this unstable weather pattern persists into early summer. Eighteen ninety-two was such a year. Rain hit the area heavily for more than a week, and by the evening of June 4, a Saturday, streams and rivulets were swelling well onto their banks.

Because of reports from safety marshals at the oil companies in Titusville, about 80 miles north of Pittsburgh in Crawford County, and due to the placing of sandbag barriers by city workers, the residents of Titusville and nearby Oil City went to bed that night thinking all would be fine. But just a few miles upstream, rain continued in the hills, swelling Oil Creek beyond its limits. If people had known, perhaps they could have averted the large-scale loss of life and property which was to ensue.

Titusville, nestled snugly in a forested stream valley in the Seneca Hills, is certainly no stranger to historical events. Although originally predicted to become prosperous because of its lumber resources, a discovery on a sweltering August afternoon in 1859 changed that idea, and history as well. On this day, the American petroleum industry was born.

Edwin Drake, a railroad worker who had set aside enough money to buy stock in a small medicine company called The Rock Oil Company, had always wanted to provide better for himself and his meager band of friends than he could through his hastily chosen profession. Of poor health, Drake had retired his position on the New York and New Haven Railroad and moved to New Haven, Connecticut. There he met a Mr. James Townsend, a co-founder of The Rock Oil Company.

Townsend told Drake of a stream he'd heard of in a small, northwestern Pennsylvania town which reportedly bled large amounts of petro-

leum. Because Drake held a railroad pass, and a trip would be of little expense, Townsend asked him to act as investigator and surveyor for the company. Drake agreed and made his first visit to the region in 1857. Later that year, he moved his family there from New Haven and set up residence as the company's representative.

After two years there, Drake tried to discover Titusville's motherload for himself. All of the oil collected to that point was that which had seeped to the earth's surface. Employing both learned mechanical skills and common sense, Drake decided to dig and drill an oil well.

His idea of a few pipes and a crude compressor was the first successful well in the world. Drake, though, made no fortune from it, dying in poverty because the money he did make went to treatment of his ever-worsening health. It was the town that hit paydirt. People flocked, nearly paralleling the hysteria of the California gold rush a decade earlier. The next two decades were boom times for southeastern Crawford County. By the summer of 1885, the town's population hit 10,000, up from 250 just 16 years before.

Oil derricks sprang up in fields along the community's eastern and southern sides, while refineries, factories, rail yards, company houses, businesses of every sort, and the mansions of the well-to-do sprang up everywhere else. Within a 10-mile radius, including an even more sudden boom town, Oil City, the area teemed with new industry and livelihood. Even though Titusville, Oil City and Pithole were connected by roads, the main artery of transportation was still Oil Creek. It starts somewhere in the mountains north of Titusville, and is one of the premier tributaries for the Allegheny River.

On this June night in 1892, the rain outstripped the watershed's capacity to handle the water. A little past 11:30 p.m., the charging water broke through the mill dam of Thompson and Eldred at Spartansburg, and picked up speed and pressure as it sent an enormous mass of water down the valley. It roared through the mill dam at Newtontown, gathering even more momentum on its trip down the valley toward Titusville. Still, the slumbering townspeople had no idea.

The wave hit almost exactly at midnight. As it rolled down the valley, it had also picked up considerable debris, including bridges that had spanned the creek. When the wave hit, it was reported that one woman was able to get out of the water by climbing onto one of the floating bridges. She reportedly beckoned others to follow suit, but the current changed and whisked her and the bridge away.

The water spread quickly over the town, reaching up to almost Spring Street, a street high on the topography. The water ruptured many

gas lines. At 2 Sunday morning, an explosion was heard, and almost immediately a stream of flame nearly 200 feet tall "pierced the inky darkness and threw a glaring light over the vast expanse of angry waves," reported the Crawford Journal, published in the county seat of Meadville. What people had thought was a thin mist of fog above the turbulent waters was actually gas vapors thrown off by oil on the water, from an upset tank. An oil fire was soon burning out of control.

It spread quickly. In less than three minutes the entire plant and its surrounding areas reportedly were a giant inferno. The light from the fire shed upon an eerie scene: hundreds of people crammed on rooftops, the only area poking above the water. Hundreds of other victims had been swept into the creek, those alive clinging to debris.

Demonstrating the journalistic style of the period, the Journal reported: "Their white and terror smitten faces, desperate struggles and plaintive cry for aid combining to create impressions never to be forgotten or enacted from the memory of the beholder."

The fire spread to several other refineries, including many in the town's west end. The first engulfed was the J.P. Thomas and Co. facility. Then the fire jumped across South Perry Street and consumed the Rice, Robinson and Foggans Refinery and Soap Works.

People attempted to get themselves and everything they could salvage, "employing every conceivable form of conveyance," according to the newspaper, into the hills north of town, even as a strong southerly wind pushed the flames toward them. Sunday dawned upon a dreadful scene. The town was a desolate background of man vs. nature. Homes and hotels in the northern section of town, untouched by the destruction, were opened to the newly destitute. The flood and fire still raged, so the only thing people could do was to try and save others.

At noon, the F.L. Wood Refinery caught fire, and the smoke was so thick that the day began to take on the appearance of night again. As this refinery erupted, five men in their late teens were seen clinging desperately to a piece of debris near a large oil tank. As hundreds tried to help them to shore and safety, fire swept over the tank; it exploded, throwing burning oil over everyone. Many more perished.

There were heroes in the disaster, though. Four men found themselves trapped by the burning American Oil Works plant. Their goal was to prevent the Woods Wax Works from catching fire. Only this way could they save their own lives. They took buckets and proceeded to douse the structure. It worked. While saving themselves, it is believed they also spared the entire west end of the city.

All told, 96 died or were unaccounted for; 114 were severely injured.

The total property damage for Titusville and its neighbors topped \$1.2 million. The flash flood is believed to be the second most deadly natural disaster in Pennsylvania history, after the Johnstown flood of 1889.

Titusville rebuilt, with the help of state relief and thousands of donations from private donors. Although the disaster is not widely known or even discussed, perhaps it is because it could never be discussed. As the *Journal* observed: "It is simply impossible to give the reader an idea of the horrible scene enacted in our midst. People do not yet realize through what they have passed." ■