More Franklin Park Stories
By Debby Rabold
Franklin Park Borough Historian



Dressers, Drillers, Gaugers & Pumpers

Franklin Park's Early Oil and Gas Industry

[Note: Franklin Township became the Borough of Franklin Park in 1961.]

LARGE OIL YIELD

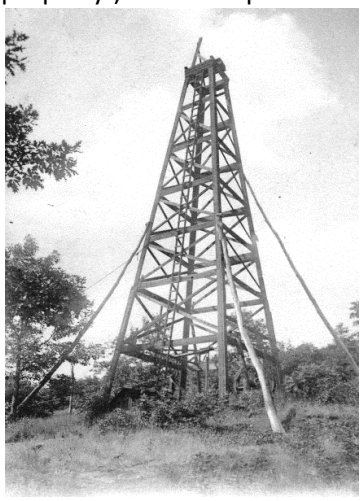
The oil works of Col. Drake, at Titusville give evidence of an almost inexhaustible supply of oil and its quality appears to improve equally with the quantity. Col. D. is now pumping up the greasy liquid at the rate of nearly a barrel an hour for twenty-four hours in the day, and sometimes that amount is far exceeded. He shipped fifty-three barrels of the oil to Pittsburgh the other day, and there are two hundred more at the Union Mills Station awaiting the convenience of the Railroad for shipment. The net profits of his one spring are estimated at over twenty thousand dollars per month.

(13 December 1859 **Daily Morning Post**)

The first commercially successful oil producing well in the United States was drilled on Oil Creek near Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859. As our nation's thirst for oil grew, wooden derricks quickly covered the hills and valleys of Western Pennsylvania. Until 1900, Appalachia was the most prolific oil region in the nation and Pennsylvania led in production. The state was known for Pennsylvania Crude, an especially high quality of oil used for lubrication.

Allegheny County's and Franklin Township's first recorded oil lease was given by Jacob Ziegler 29 May 1885. The first seventy-five pages of the county's first volume of oil and gas leases are comprised of leases from Franklin, Ohio, Marshall, McCandless and Pine townships in the county's northern region. Because of secrecy, some wells were never recorded.

Drilling and operating a well was an expensive undertaking. Speculators sold shares to finance projects before buying oil and gas rights from landowners, who received payment for leasing the land along with the usual 1/8 share royalty from the well's monthly production. (Ellen Van der Voort Becker recalled her parents receiving a monthly fifteen dollar royalty check from the well on their Wilvan Lane property.) Leases stipulated how long the agreement would remain in effect and where wells could be drilled relative to buildings and cultivated fields. Landowners were often provided with the free use of natural gas to heat and light their homes with some Franklin Park homes continuing to receive gas from nearby wells.



Many of Franklin Park's early wells were clustered along Big Sewickley Creek where derricks dotted the valley floor and surrounding hillsides. Once known as Duff's Mill in recognition of the early 19th century grist mill that stood as a local landmark, the area's name was changed to Duff City in anticipation of a boomtown that never materialized. At its peak, over 500 wells pumped from the Duff City oil pool that lies beneath portions of Franklin Park and Marshall Township.



View of the Duff City area looking west along Big Sewickley Creek circa 1940.

THE NEW OIL FIELD

They have the petroleum fever back of Sewickley-have it badly- and the staid farmers who have heretofore depended mainly on the sale of agricultural products to secure other things and enjoy life generally, are now too rich to farm, at least some of them are…

It is only seven or eight miles northeast from Sewickley to Duff City, but if you attempt to follow the directions given in Sewickley, 10 to 1 you will land in Beaver county the first thing you know. The safest way to guide a stranger is to tell him to pass the big dairy farm with its palatial stables, and when he gets to Sewickley creek, follow it up until he comes to a schoolhouse, and a very poor-looking one at that; then turn to the left and keep on in a general way promiscuously until he sees derricks.

A REGION FULL OF DOGS

There is an utter absence of finger-boards [directional signs] *to provide for, which in Pennsylvania a portion of the dog tax should be diverted, for to be compelled to drive half a mile from a road to learn the way, and then be confronted with a pack of savage dogs, is not one of the least ills that beset the traveler in the wilds of Pennsylvania – and there are wilds almost within the classic precincts of Sewickley. They are all placarded* [posted] *and at first sight one would suppose the country had fallen into the hands of some enterprising real estate broker. Each, however, contains a threat of prosecution for anyone found hunting or shooting on them. A native said of the county was largely a shooting preserve of Mr. Westinghouse. Why anyone should want to shoot on them passes comprehension, for there was certainly no evidence of animated live seen in a drive of several miles, save a frisky chickaree, or pine squirrel, and a real sportsman does not consider this kind of squirrel game.*

Down Sewickley creek is a road at best uninteresting as the native population is pretty nearly all gone and the average denizen can mix English gesprechen. Duff city is the baby city in the galaxy of Pennsylvania municipalities. It is pleasantly situated at the base of several low hills. Architecturally it possesses the usual oil town variety. The substantial old farmhouses are already flanked by engine houses and shanties, and derricks are sprouting in all directions, both on hill and vale.

THE COMFORTS OF LIFE

As yet there are no sidewalks or pavements, but it is said there is a full-blown poker joint and a speak-easy in blast, though no signs of either were visible to the casual visitor. The local butcher, a man named Downey, stated that his sales had increased 400 percent in the month. The city is of the same age as that of the first big well struck on the Duff farm. This well was struck soon after the equinox about the

last of September or the first of October. It is still flowing eight to nine barrels an hour. Previous to this a well on the George Sohn farm was flowing at a 12 barrel a day rate, when the greater part of the territory had been previously leased by various companies…. [Some companies wanted to drill] *for oil and others for gas, and others for both. Some leases were gotten very cheap, others not so cheap…*

BRISK OPERATIONS

On the Duff, Rhodes, Downey, Sohn, Hamilton and Rosensteel farms there are nearly 30 derricks up or building, and within 30 or 60 days the capacity of the territory thereabouts will be well tested. One thing seemed to be pretty well agreed upon by drillers, and that was that the territory was likely to prove somewhat spotted. Some drillers think there may be some very large wells struck, while the number of dry holes will be large…

(10 November 1889 **Pittsburgh Dispatch**)

If you ride out to Duff City any of these fine frosty mornings and the roads about Sewickley , though rough with ruts, are not impassable as they were a week ago with mud you will find three oil wells right on the edge of the Little Sewickley Creek. Duff's City is a somewhat grandiose name for a farmhouse or two, a blacksmith shop, a flourmill and a copse of derricks, three miles north of Sewickley. There have been exciting times there lately, because of his majesty petroleum has been spouting from some of the holes in a truly royal style.

But about those three wells, the derricks of which you cannot fail to notice upon a narrow swampy strip of land beside the Little Sewickley, there is an odd story connected with them. On a shingle nailed to the derrick of one of these wells is scrawled in rude letters: Mish'nery Number 1.

Here's the key to the story. The land on which these three wells are drilled belongs to a young man who, when a boy, was bound apprentice, or something of that sort, to Farmer Duff. In lieu of pay for his service, Mr. Duff gave the boy the slice of land by the creek. The land did not seem worth the taxes upon it then. But a few months ago, oil was struck on the Duff property and the indications were that the strip of land by the creek covered with stones and overflowed half the time by the creek was in the oil belt.

Presently some oilmen waited on the youthful owner and proposed to bore for oil on a certain contract. The young man was willing, but surprised the gentlemen who were negotiating with him by insisting that it should be stated specifically in the lease that his share of the profits as agreed upon should go to the missionaries. They explained to him that he could do what he liked with his money, which would be aid to him regularly in the usual way. But he insisted on the insertion of the clause as to the missionaries.

Oil was struck in the first well put down, and since then two other wells have come in on the same property. The wells are called Missionary 1, 2 and 3.They are not gigantic gushers, but good paying wells….

(26 January 1890 **Pittsburgh Dispatch**)

The rise and fall of oil territory in public notice is something that strikes an outsider as strange, considering the amount of money at hazard in any particular district. Last winter Duff City, a farm house, blacksmith shop and possibly a post office, back of Sewickley, sprang from nothingness into fame in one day, when a report of a wildcatter's strike reached the Oil Exchange. Impatient travelers hastening to the place splashed the mud all over fences, hedges, trees and buildings near the road. Large bonus was paid to some people, some good wells were gotten and some lawsuits, as usual, entered by claim contestants. For a week Duff City was all the talk, and then it was heard of no more, though there is considerable activity at Duff City today and it is fairly good oil territory. But it had its day in petroleum history, and will likely never be heard of again, unless a phenomenal gusher be tapped.

(24 July 1890 **Pittsburgh Dispatch**)

By 1899, the Ingomar oil pool had been identified and soon wells were being drilled in that section of Franklin and McCandless townships. Included in this field were wells along West Ingomar Road and those clustered around the Nicholson and Rochester roads intersection along with what is today the Settler's Walk subdivision. Wells operated on the grounds of Franklin Elementary School and Franklin (Ingomar) Methodist Church [see photo]. Production in the Ingomar Field peaked around World War I.



A third, smaller field ½ mile wide and 1 ½ miles long crossed Franklin Township along its southeastern boundary with McCandless. Wells on the King, Hartman and English farms pumped from what was known as the Sandle Field where the oil producing layer was less than twenty-five feet thick.



Several locally owned oil and gas companies operated in Franklin Township. The Charles Wachter Oil and Gas Company owned and operated sixteen wells in Franklin Township, Ohio Township and Glenfield, supplying gas to 250 customers from its McAleer Road pump station. Excess gas was sold to the Equitable Gas Company.

Duff City Oil and Gas of Franklin Township operated from a building at the corner of Rochester and West Ingomar roads [see above] until being purchased by Equitable Gas in 1932. In its day, the company provided natural gas service for up to 1,500 customers scattered as far as Perrysville, Glenfield, Duff City and Wexford. Equitable built a new facility on the site in 1972 from which service personnel continued to operate until the property was sold to Franklin Park Borough for a new municipal building that opened in 1998.

Glen Foster recalled many local producers selling oil to the Freedom-Valvoline Oil Company since it paid ten cents a gallon more than its competitors. [A barrel holds forty-two gallons of crude oil.] Oil was pumped to the company's refinery in Freedom, Beaver County where gasoline, naphtha, kerosene, fuel oil and lubricants were produced.

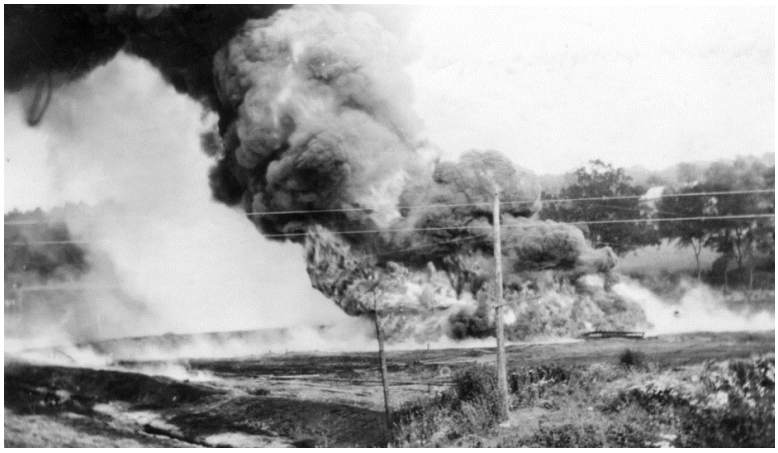
Originally a subsidiary of the giant Standard Oil Company, South Penn Oil operated wells throughout Pennsylvania, West Virginia and New York. Headquartered in Pittsburgh, it became a standalone company following the 1911 dissolution of Standard Oi. Its local office was located on Perry Highway on Pine Creek Hill in McCandless. What was once South Penn Oil is now part of the Shell Oil Corporation.

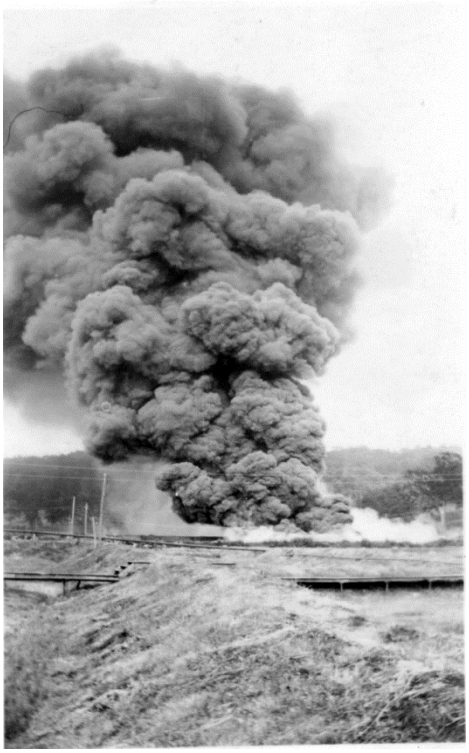
National Transit Oil Company, another former Standard Oil subsidiary, operated the Nedskey pumping station that stood next to Ingomar Road where Trader Horn and the surrounding parking lot are currently located. Crude oil was trucked and piped to holding tanks at Nedskey from where it was piped to distant refineries. Once each month, Franklin Township resident and oil company employee Wiley Sarver walked portions of the pipelines, checking for leaks.



The Nedskey Pumping Station as it appeared from McKnight Road. Date: after 1950

Shortly after 9 PM on 7 July 1929, lightning struck the roof of a twenty-five foot high 21,000 barrel holding tank at Nedskey's. Burning oil spewed from the collapsing tank into a blazing pool 400-500 feet across, spilling into Pine Creek where a downstream bridge was burned. Over two hundred firefighters from surrounding communities and a special chemical team dispatched from Oil City, Pennsylvania fought to keep the flames from spreading to seven other nearby tanks. Residents joined in the effort by digging a fire bank to keep the pool of burning oil from spreading over an even larger area. Oil burned for twenty-six hours and flames were visible for twenty miles. An estimated $50,000 in loses were reported.





Area wells were still producing into the 1920 and 1930s, but as prices and production fell, wells became less profitable to operate. A 1 January 1947 Geologic Survey report concluded that local oil production was at best spotty. By then, the Duff City field had 400 abandoned wells compared to 120 producing wells that on average were pumping a mere ½ barrel per day.

In 1976, there were an estimated fifteen to twenty wells still operating within Franklin Park. It is impossible to determine the exact number of wells currently operating in the borough, since not all wells are documented.

"You get a feeling that there's oil. You have a hunch."
Glen Foster

Many Franklin Township wells were 1200' to 1600' deep and more, tapping into several different layers of oil and gas deposits known as sands. Some wells produced oil and some produced gas, while others produced both. The sandstone layers that held gas and oil deposits were sometimes saturated with salt water and at times, as many as forty barrels of water were pumped for each barrel of oil.

In the early years, drillers arrived on the site with their equipment hauled by a team of horses. Deciding where to drill was often guesswork with plenty of dusters or dry wells dug. Once a site was decided upon, an eighty foot derrick was constructed of rough pine or in later years, of steel pipes. One well known driller was Matt Wally who dug fifty-four wells in Franklin and McCandless. Many of the wells along West Ingomar Road were known as "Wally Wells". [Notice the many derricks along West Ingomar Road in the photo below. Looking west from McCandless toward Franklin.]



The dresser's job was to keep drill bits sharpened for Matt Wally and other drillers as they dug the wells. Worn and dulled bits were heated in portable forges then reshaped with repeated blows from a sledgehammer.

After the wells were in operation, pumpers operated the steam engine and other equipment used to pump the wells. Some wells had enough natural pressure to cause the oil to flow to the surface into holding tanks while others had to be pumped. How often a well was pumped depended on how quickly it filled. Some wells pumped continuously and others only needed to be attended to periodically. In the early years, some folks objected to wells being pumped on Sundays, in violation of the state's Blue Laws. The Law and Order League asked the Allegheny County courts to ban pumping on Sundays, but the judge ruled that pumping oil wells on Sundays was necessary and dismissed the suit. Those who remember the wells tell of how the pumping noise lulled them to sleep at night and how they awoke if the pumping stopped.

As a young boy, Warren Soergel often accompanied his grandfather Elmer Uhlenberg of Pine Township when Mr. Uhlenberg pumped wells on Wexford-Bayne Road on the current site of the Spectra office building. The two would enjoy lunch together as oil filled the holding tanks. Mr. Soergel treasured his grandfather's metal lunch bucket and the memories of the times he and his grandfather had together.

"When I was a kid, we went coon hunting in the hollow where the Millvale Sportsman's Club is. My dad would get upset because we couldn't hear the dogs barking because of the noise made by the well," said Mr. Soergel.

"The water was saltier than Billy be darned. It was thick with salt."
Glen Foster

Salt water, crude oil, natural gas or any combination of the three were pumped from the wells into holding tanks that in the early years were built with wood staves held together with iron rings. Oil and salt water seeping from the tanks would soak into the ground on which they stood. In later years, metal tanks were used.



Being the heaviest, water would sink to the bottom of the tank where it was drained through a plug that could be opened and closed. Using a rod, the gauger would then measure the amount of oil in the tank before it was either piped or the tank hauled away. If natural gas were present, it would rise to the top of the tank were it could be collected. Natural gas was often used to power the engines used to pump the wells or at times, was simply burned off.

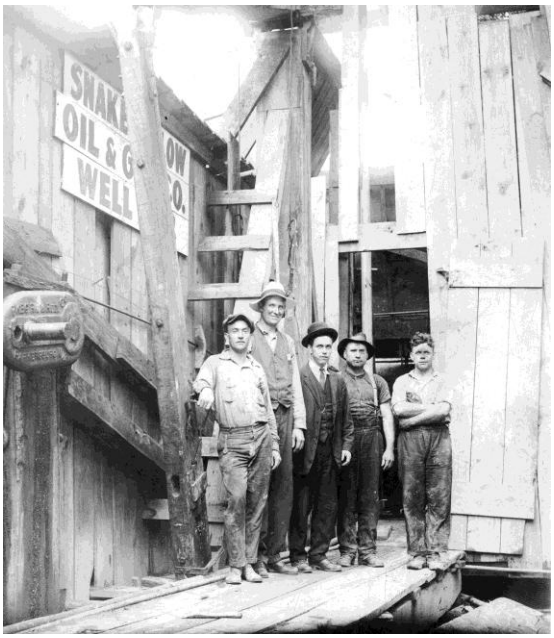
Teamsters hauled drilling rigs, equipment, lumber and tanks of crude oil. Contractors built and repaired the wells before having to dismantle them when no longer in service. According to the 1920 U. S. Census, forty-two Franklin Township residents listed industry related occupations as their livelihood.

When a well was no longer producing, it was "abandoned". Abandoning a well was the reverse of drilling. A pulley attached to the top of the derrick was used to pull casings, rods and other equipment from inside the well. Any oil, water or gas remaining in the well was to be pumped and disposed of before the hole was filled and sealed with cement slurry. Lastly, surface equipment had to be dismantled and hauled away.

As a young boy, Joe Watenpool watched with curiosity as a well was drilled near his Brandt School Road home. A steam engine powered the drill used to dig the shaft. Nearby stood a forge where metal bits were heated in hot coals before being hammered into shape by men wielding sledgehammers. Mr. Watenpool remembered climbing the ladder built onto the side of the derrick and sitting on top while below, his mother tried to contain her horror so as not to upset Joe and cause him to fall. There were times when Joe and his older sister Marcella would climb onto the roof of the well shed and ride the walking beam used to pump the well as they would a see saw.

It was not unusual for children to play in the oil fields. George Clowes described oilrigs as being jungle gyms even though playing on them resulted in broken arms. Ellen Van der Voort Becker also remembered playing on the wells as a child. "When the men went home at night, they left the rig so they could give it a push to start it again. They left one big wheel up." Mrs. Becker and her friends soon

discovered they could ride the long drive belt by pushing the wheel that powered it while being careful to jump off before getting mangled in the machinery.



Dangers were not limited to adventurous children. Charles Wachter lost both legs in a flywheel and had to learn to walk on wooden legs. Paul Hague tells the story of his father Julius trading shifts with another worker at South Penn Oil's "Lease" next to Hague's Rochester Road farm. Over night, when Julius would normally have been working, an explosion and fire occurred, killing his co-worker. Herb Sarver reported how oil in the holding tanks would thicken in cold weather and that fires were built around the tanks to heat and thin the oil to where it would flow through the pipelines. Fires and explosions occurred frequently.

Once, while riding his bike along Brandt School Road, Mr. Watenpool stopped to watch a well being drilled at the current location of the Auto Service Mall. [Photo on right.] Oil erupted from the ground, shot over the top of the derrick and showered down on the unfortunate bystanders.

To break through layers of rock while drilling or to increase the flow in an existing well, a specialist was hired to "shoot" the well by dropping nitroglycerine into the shaft. An exceptional well came in during the early 1920s on the Broerman Farm, now the Ramblewood subdivision next to Brandt School Road. When this well was shot, the ground shook as the sound of the explosion echoed through the valley below. The well continued to produce for many years until the subdivision was built.

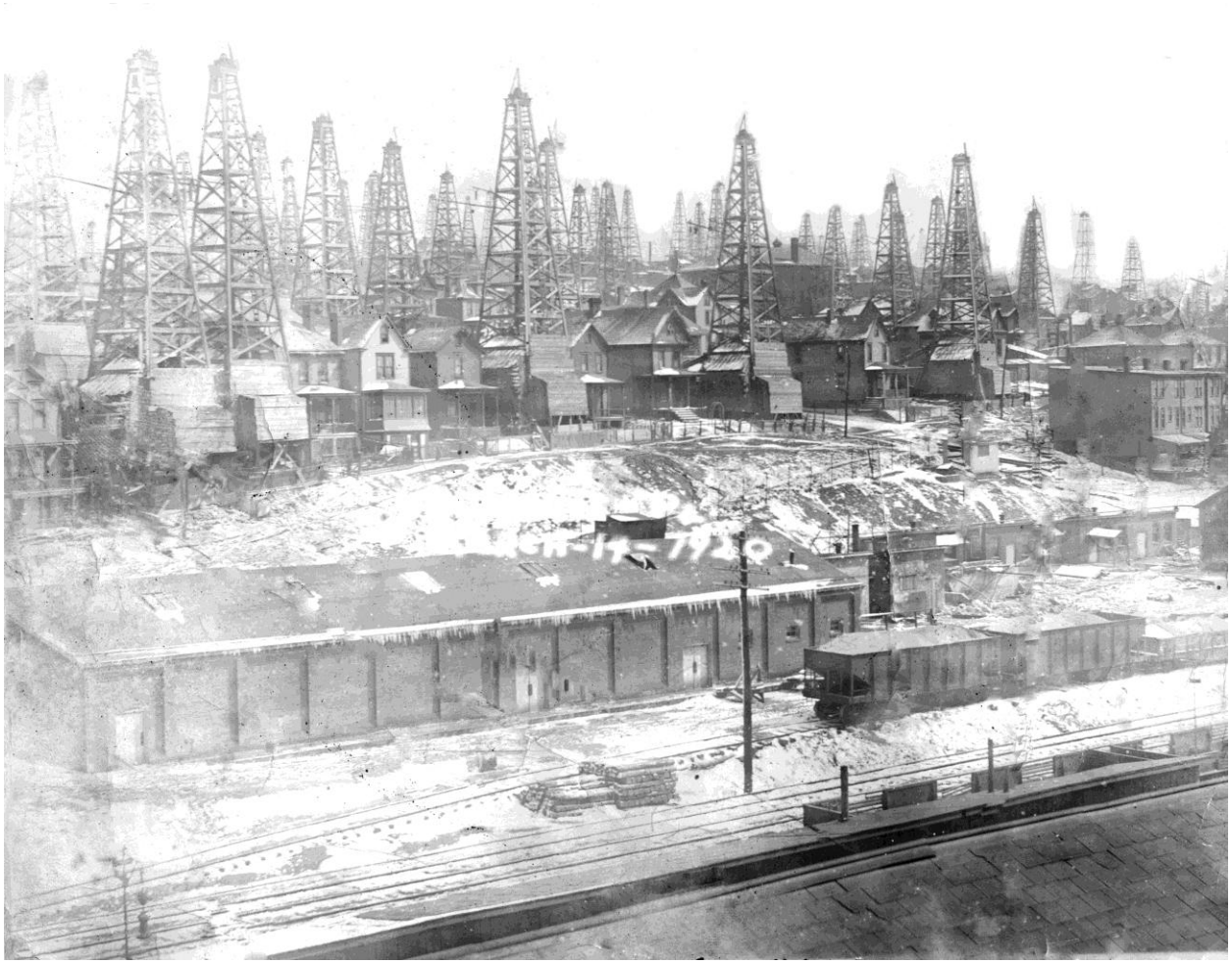
South Penn Oil ran an operation on the Jesse Neely farm that is today a portion of the Settler's Walk subdivision alongside Interstate-79. Sheds, tanks and wells stood on what was called "The Lease" where Mr. Watenpool remembered customers buying "casehead" gasoline for ten cents a gallon. A by-product of oil wells, casehead or "wet" gasoline was siphoned off and used to operate automobiles and tractors. Not the same quality as regular gasoline, it could be used as an extender. Bill Hoffman used casehead gasoline to fill the tank of his Model A Ford. The engine smoked and the car had to run up hills backward, but the car ran and that's all that was important to a teenage boy. Local boys also enjoyed swimming in a large tank of water at "The Lease" that was used to cool the engines. The "heated pool" was about eight feet deep and ten to twelve feet across.



The rooftop of the Franklin (Ingomar) Methodist Church is seen on the opposite side of the well that stood on the nearby Van der Voort property. Children would ride the walking beams used to pump the wells.

Did you know……

Joe Trees and Michael Benedum were two of the great wildcatters who became multi-millionaires. They worked for South Penn Oil before striking out on their own. Tree's 2,600 Pine Township estate, formerly known as Treesdale Farms, is now the Treesdale Estates subdivision.



The McKeesport Gas Boom

After a promising natural gas field was discovered in McKeesport, Pennsylvania in 1919, "gas fever" struck. Speculators were offering property owners as much as $25,000 for a 75' x 160' lot on which to drill. As you can see in the photo, wells were built so close that they almost touched. Men from Franklin Township made the trip to McKeesport with their teams and wagons to haul lumber for derricks. Within a year, the large number of wells drained the gas field that took reportedly took $13 million to develop and yielded only $3 million worth of gas. The boom was over.