

Memories of Pointe-a-Pierre

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It has often been said that the history of Trinidad Oil began with the European discovery of the Pitch Lake by Sir Walter Raleigh and others in 1595. Others have said that the true beginning of the industry was the discovery of oil by Walter Darwent in 1866 on the Aripere Estate. However, true commercialisation of Darwent's find could not be effected at that time because of a lack of interest by the original funding company, the West Indies Petroleum Company in the USA, through its subsidiary, the Trinidad Petroleum Company. Subsequent efforts to revive the industry by local investors were de-railed by the death of Darwent in 1868. Thereafter, the efforts of one Randolph Rust aided and abetted by a local Chinaman, John Lee Lum, resulted in many efforts at producing oil on both the Aripere Estate and in Guayaguayare/Mayaro. All this is clearly detailed in a well-written book *A History of Trinidad Oil* by George E. Higgins et al.

My experience of the oil industry in Trinidad began in 1958 when, as a student at Loughborough College in England, I had to be assigned to an approved industry as part of my course in Chemical Engineering. Texaco took me for nine months. Texaco had in 1956 acquired the Regent Refining Company's Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd's holdings in Trinidad. The refinery acquired was a 75,000 barrel per day (b/d) one which Texaco eventually increased to a 360,000 b/d refinery. In my student apprenticeship time I was taken to see what was described as the first commercial well in Trinidad – the Helena 1 well in Forest Reserve. It was drilled in 1908 and even in 1958 was still producing. I returned to England in 1959, finished my final year in 1960 where I was granted a BTech degree in Chemical Engineering.

At my graduation Texaco UK sent three gentlemen to offer me a job, which I gladly accepted.

Work at Texaco was very pleasant. I lived in what



The children of Texaco employees at play at the Pointe-a-Pierre Yacht Club in the 1960s

was called 'The Mess', accommodation for bachelors. There was a beautiful Club on the Camp which had about 400 houses on a 600 acre, well-maintained estate. The camp was essentially for foreigners with a few locals. There were tennis courts and a golf course, which many considered the best in Trinidad at the time.

At that time the refinery expansion was in full swing with the addition of a 160,000 b/d Topping Unit as well as fixed bed Platformer units for converting naphthenes to aromatics. (Benzene in gasoline for octane upgrade was considered acceptable in those days). A new Vacuum Unit was also added with the associated units for Lubricating Oil manufacture. These were essentially Solvent Neutral Oils (SNO Oils) for export but a Lube Blending Plant was added to blend finished lubes for local Caribbean and Central American consumption.

The old refinery consisted of Topping Units, two Vacuum Units, a Dubbs Thermal Cracking Unit, a Fluidised Catalytic Cracking Unit (FCCU), an Alkylation Unit with an associated Isomerisation Unit and a Sulphuric Acid Plant and a Sulphur Production Plant. The area where the FCCU the Alky and Isom Units were located was known as the Eastern Refinery. It was built by the British War Department in 1941 as a means of providing high octane gasoline for the Royal Air Force during World War II. Of the four Alkylation units of that design built at that time, only the Pointe-a-Pierre Refinery unit survived, to be shut down for replacement recently. The other three were said to have burned to the ground!

Later, a normal paraffins plant was built to produce straight chain paraffins. The idea was based on the belief at that time,

that straight chain paraffins when alkylated with a benzene ring would produce a more stable detergent than that produced with branch chain paraffins. The idea proved to be incorrect so that the plant was mothballed some time later.

Sociologically, an interesting development took place in 1963. After spending some time in the Technical Department, I was assigned to Process Operations. While working in that department, I got married in late 1962. I was then told that while there was accommodation for local bachelors on the Camp, Company Policy was for married locals to find their own housing nearby in San Fernando or surroundings. A friend, who had gone on 'long leave', lent me his house while I looked for one. One night there was a problem at No. 8 Topping Unit, the large new one. I was the engineer on call for the refinery that night. The procedure called for the Shift Supervisor to call the garage to send a car for me. There was a mix-up and delay in my getting the call or the car. By the time I arrived at the refinery, there was a fire in the pump house necessitating the shutdown of the Unit. This was successfully accomplished, but the following morning, the Refinery Manager was most upset. He demanded of the Personnel Department, to know why there

were foreign accountants and other personnel not essential for the running of the refinery housed on the Camp while others, who were, had to live off the Camp. The result was that within a week I had been assigned a house on the Camp at Bonne Aventure Park.

The original reason why Texaco decided to buy the Leaseholds properties was because the then Chairman of Texaco had been a major figure in the oil supply chain for the European World War II effort. He recognised the value of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery in supplying both Europe and West Africa. Additionally, at that time tanker sizes were increasing and there was no port in the Eastern or Gulf coasts of the United States (US) that could accommodate a tanker of more than 36 ft draft. Super tankers required water depths of 90 ft or more. Trinidad could accommodate that. Texaco's crude supply came mainly from Aramco in Saudi Arabia. The tankers used for these long hauls around the Cape of Good Hope, were super tankers.

By the mid-1970s when Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) started dictating the price of crude, the Trinidad and Tobago Government, like most other governments of oil producing states, began revising the terms

Texaco's Corporate Headquarters at Pointe-a-Pierre. Completed in 1960, it was the most prestigious office block in Trinidad at that time



Photograph courtesy of Petrotrin

of agreements with majors and other oil companies for oil production. Possibly as a result, Trinidad's crude oil production peaked in 1978 at 278,000 b/d. By the early 1980s discussions were being held between the government and Texaco about the ownership and control of the oil industry. Exxon and other oil majors had joined forces to build a deepwater port offshore. Seadock, as it was called, was built off Louisiana to accommodate super tankers. Texaco then built a domestic refinery at Convent Louisiana to effectively replace Pointe-a-Pierre.

In 1974, the government had taken over the old Shell refinery at Point Fortin known as UBOT (United British Oilfields Trinidad). This was renamed Trintoc. By 1986, the government purchased the Texaco landholdings and refinery to create an expanded Trintoc. In 1993, Trintoc was merged with the holdings of the former Trinidad-Tesoro Oil Company to form Petrotrin – the National Oil Company. (Tesoro was a small

Texan oil company which had taken over the BP producing fields in the late sixties when BP decided to leave).

In more recent developments, the Venezuelan National Oil Company, PDVSA, offered attractive terms to many Caribbean islands for the purchase of crude and products. Many of them accepted, resulting in a significant diminution in Petrotrin's market. The gasoline and gasoil qualities were suited to West Indian markets but not to US or other foreign markets. As a result, Petrotrin undertook a major correction by replacing the old Alkylation and Acid plants, replacing the fixed bed Platformers with a Continuous Circulation Reformer (CCR), adding a Gas to Liquids (GTL) plant and increasing the capacity of the FCCU. These changes are currently under way and are expected to be completed by the end of 2009. It is apparent that these latest moves are designed to enable Petrotrin to export gasolines and gasoils to US and/or other foreign markets. □

Employees gather at Pointe-a-Pierre refinery to celebrate the commissioning of the Rexformer Unit in 1958

