

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE MODERN ENERGY INDUSTRY

A brief history of Trinidad's oil sector up to 1962, by Angelo Bissessarsingh

This was a time when monumental tasks were performed and wealth drawn from primeval forest

As our nation celebrates five decades of independence on 31st August 2012, one is sometimes led to wonder what life would have been like had we never been blessed with the economic bounty of the petroleum industry. Indeed, a great deal of hardship may have been our lot as well as the absence of the many public privileges we sometimes take for granted, so that as we celebrate this pivotal milestone, the Ministry of Energy & Energy Affairs takes a reflective look at the local oil industry in the period from its inception up until the moment of independence in 1962.

Independence of an economic nature may have been in the thoughts of Captain Walter P. Darwent when he drilled what was to become the first producing oil well in the island in 1866. Indeed, the presence of petroleum had been realised some time prior to this significant occurrence since British geologists Messrs Wall and Sawkins were commissioned to compile a comprehensive geological survey of the island by the Secretary of State for the Colonies a decade earlier. While primarily concerned with the investigation of the

presence of mineral coal and manjack (a high-quality asphalt), the surveyors noted the presence of petroleum in the famous Pitch Lake, which even then was being commercially exploited, as well as in the tertiary shales of the south coast. Kerosene was already being distilled from the asphalt of the Guapo region and was commonly known as 'pitch oil'.

The possible existence of petroleum in the area attracted the attention of Captain Darwent, who at the time was resident in Port of Spain with his family. Darwent, a veteran of the Apache Wars in the USA, was convinced that the area around the Pitch Lake held commercially viable quantities of 'black gold'. He travelled to New York in 1864 and through much perseverance attracted venture capital to incorporate the Paria Petroleum Company in 1865. After much trauma, the company was formed and equipment acquired. This was done for an additional US\$6,300 in local shares, purchased by some of the most powerful businessmen in the island. The firm had no board of directors, being managed by the shareholders themselves and the President, Captain Darwent. He was sure of the viability of the enterprise, and was not daunted by the detractors who scoffed at the venture.

Darwent was so certain that the project would yield great returns he purchased thousands of wooden casks to hold the oil. These were stacked in an empty lot near San Fernando Hill. This energetic man then moved his equipment by steamer to La Brea. Prospecting around the area, he discovered seepages of oil on Aripere Estate, a defunct sugar plantation. Darwent erected a steam engine, and a crude wooden rig. He struck a rich oil sand at only 200 feet, but the pressure of gas was so low he could not get the oil to the surface. He tried using dippers attached to a cable but this was abortive since the clayey soil often collapsed, filling the bore. The failure to produce oil in marketable



Clearing Oil Sands, Trinidad, B.W.I. Stephens, Ltd., Trinidad.



Exploration Syndicate in 1901. By 1902, Rust was ready to begin drilling. Since there was no road access to the area, manpower and equipment were sent to Guayaguayare by steamer and then ferried four miles up the Pilot River on rafts and canoes where a site had been cleared and levelled by hand. Erecting a rickety wooden and iron drilling rig, powered by a steam engine, Rust and his men struck a rich oil sand at just 850 feet. The recovery process was even cruder than the drilling apparatus. A large well was dug and a pulley system installed, on which drill pipe dippers were dipped in the pooling oil and then dumped into wooden barrels which were then loaded on canoes and taken to the mouth of the river. Some of the oil was drained off to a metal holding tank, while still more was poured into an earthen sump or pit.

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amounts caused the Paria Petroleum Company to collapse. Darwent himself was disheartened. He contracted yellow fever and died at La Brea in 1868, just one year after striking oil. The hunt for black gold died with him until nearly five decades later.

Major Randolph Rust was one of the luminaries of Trinidad's history, being a man of many parts, and had come out to Trinidad in 1882. In the 1880s, a surveyor mapping the southeastern coast noticed seepages of oil in the Guayaguayare forest. He sent a sample to England, only for it to be returned with a terse note which said that the sample had to be fake since it was too pure. By 1893, Rust, who had been bitten by the oil bug, was in the same forest looking at the seepages. The land was owned by a Chinese merchant named John Lee Lum who had a thriving provision business in Port of Spain. Rust was sufficiently convinced of the commercial possibilities of oil, and unlike Trinidad's first driller, undertook to provide financing for his enterprise before drilling. Backed by Lee Lum, Rust entered into a partnership with the Walkerville Whisky Company of Canada to form the Canadian Oil

In the infancy of the local oil industry, as many as 300 small companies were registered before 1920 to prospect for oil, many of which never even got off to a start for want of capital. Arthur Beeby Thompson, a geologist, was prospecting in the Guapo area in the period 1909-10 and came to the determination that

Above: Walter Darwent's Aripero well, drilled 1866, pictured 1890s



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vast quantities of oil lay under the surface. The successes of Thompson and the establishment of a refinery by United British Oilfields Trinidad (UBOT) at Point Fortin in 1912 made the lands from La Brea to Point Fortin exceedingly valuable. These lands were former sugar estates, founded by French settlers in the late 1780s. By 1850, most had been abandoned and the area returned to the woods, with the exception of small patches of peasant cultivation by the ex-slaves and their descendants of the estates. Particularly rich deposits existed at Perseverance Estate, a large cocoa plantation at Vance River, Guapo

The frontier of jungle and disease confronted by the drillers was arduous. This was a time when monumental tasks were performed and wealth drawn from primeval forest. Fyzabad was developing as an oil area almost simultaneously with Guapo and Point Fortin. Apex Oilfields Ltd, led by the formidable Colonel Horace Hickling (who was to become one of the most powerful men in the island and a Member of the

Legislative Council) also began acquiring lands at Forest Reserve, Fyzabad, both from peasant cocoa proprietors and by lease from the Crown. Most of these lands had to be cleared for the erection of drill sites, housing camps, refineries, roads, pipelines and the entire infrastructure necessary to make the extraction of oil feasible.

Roads in particular were vital to the industry, as the use of the motor car was imperative, not only for rapid ease of movement, but also for visiting Port of Spain and San Fernando. For example, Trinidad Leaseholds had fields at Barrackpore near Penal, and also at Fyzabad, more than 20 miles away, as well as a refinery at Point Fortin, another 18 miles from Fyzabad. Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd had also erected a refinery at Pointe-a-Pierre on the remnants of three sugar estates it acquired in 1912-13. A good road network was vital. In the infant days of the industry, the bulldozer was still unknown and most of the work of clearing the forest and levelling trajectories for roads fell to an amazing class of labourer, now forgotten in history, called the tattoo gangs. Tattoo gangs consisted of both men and women, who lived as peasants near the area of development. The men were powerful with an axe and hewed thousands of trees to make clearings in the forest. The women would cull the underbrush with cutlasses before firing the whole. Logs would be dragged by oxen (later crawler tractor) parallel to each other and smeared with a layer of gravel and clay to create corduroy roads.

A similar scene was occurring far to the north where Alex Duckham was establishing Trinidad Central Oilfields in 1911 at Tabaquite, which was the only oilfield which sold gasoline by the drum to motorcar owners, the drums being sent by train to Port of Spain via the railway. A sad incident occurred in 1928 when the Dome Oilwell No. 3, a privately owned concern, exploded killing the owner and fifteen others. It was a sobering reminder of the dangers of the oilfields. For the white

Drillers at an early wellhead



expatriates, neat bungalows and clubhouses provided an idyllic life amid the forest of oil derricks, but the average labourer sweated for less than 50 cents a day. It is this disparity in wages and living conditions which brought a fiery Grenadian oilman named Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler into a headlong confrontation with the powerful Colonel Hickling at Fyzabad. Viewed as a serious threat, many attempts were made to arrest Butler, culminating in an incident wherein the arresting officer, Corporal Carl King was hideously burnt to death by a mob, which sparked the ‘Butler Riots’ of 1937.

Butler was partially forgotten however, when the threat of World War II loomed large in 1939. World War I had caught Trinidad’s oil industry in its infancy, but now, our petroleum resources were a vital asset for the Allied forces in Europe which demanded every drop they could get for the stand against the Wehrmacht of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. The Bases Agreement was signed by American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill in 1941. It spelt an end to a way of life which had persisted for two generations. Faced with the onslaught of the Nazi war machine and the terrible threat of German U-Boats lurking in the Atlantic, the Allied forces consolidated their resources in a united front which saw England receiving 50 outdated destroyer vessels for the seriously weakened Royal Navy in return for permitting the United States military under a 99-year lease to erect bases in its Caribbean colonies. Trinidad was of immense strategic importance because of its petroleum fields and refineries which, at one time during the war, supplied the majority of the fuel needed for the Allied forces in Europe.

Fuel was rationed locally while the refineries at Point Fortin and Pointe-a-Pierre worked non-stop. Convoys of tankers, escorted by armed vessels, left Trinidad on an almost daily basis, yet in 1942 a U-Boat managed to sink

two cargo vessels in Port-of-Spain in spite of all precautions, including a vast submarine net stretched across the Bocas Drago. Pointe-a-Pierre especially was protected since it provided most of the aviation fuel for the Royal Air Force. When the war ended in 1945, the oil industry was faced with shrinking land resources. In 1955 a successful oil well was drilled offshore near Soldado Rock by Texaco, which had acquired all the assets of Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd, amid much public furor at a ‘Yankee’ company’s ownership of the largest portion of domestic oil holdings. In that year, the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission opened a huge power plant at Syne Village, Penal, which was fuelled by natural gas supplied from an underground reservoir – a first for the nation. In 1962, the largest oil drilling platform in the world drilled as many as 36 wells in our waters, signalling a new era for the petroleum industry as well as for Trinidad and Tobago, which on 31st August that year, won its independence from Britain and was free to chart its own destiny. ■

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DeLong jack-up barge off Trinidad’s West coast, 1960s