

The Great Berryessa Oil Rush(es): 1900 and 1920

If you look at the map of Lake Berryessa, you'll notice a location on the east shore called Oil Well Canyon. I had always wondered what that meant until I attended a seminar a few years ago and saw photos of an oil well near where the Bureau of Reclamation headquarters building now stands.

The first "Oil Rush" began when some local businessman and a professional surveyor went prospecting for oil in Berryessa Valley in October 1900. They returned with several full bottles that they said came from springs. A well should be drilled, one told the Napa Journal, to find the source somewhere in the sandstone and shale below. Within days an "expert" from the Mt. Shasta Oil and Development Company said they were going to develop what suddenly became known as the "Berryessa Oil Lands." Soon after that the Monticello Oil Company was formed.

Oil strikes were making news all over the country. It was oozing out elsewhere in Northern California and positively bursting from the ground in the state's south. The value of this new form of gold was only beginning to be recognized. As a replacement for whale oil and tallow, "rock oil" or "coal oil," as it was once called, illuminated homes around the country in the form of kerosene. Gasoline was used as a cleaning solvent. Oil was converted to light whole buildings as well as city streets. It lubricated the moving parts of bigger machines, like the locomotives and cars of the Southern Pacific. But by far the most significant use of oil would prove to be as a fuel in a contraption called the "internal combustion engine."

When Henry Ford began making gasoline-powered vehicles, he started a demand that transformed the world. Ford's first automobile was completed and ready to go in 1896. The horseless carriage had become a rare but impressive sight on the streets in many American cities by 1902, and someone had already driven a motored vehicle through Napa. Prompted by the invention of the automobile, oil production in California had grown from 470,000 barrels in 1893 to 24,000,000 by 1903.

Now practically everyone with any cash in the bank made a beeline to Berryessa. President of the Miners' Petroleum Association said, "I consider the oil indications in Northern California superior to any that I have seen in any part of the world." People promised that there would be an oil rush in California that echoed the great gold rush 50 years earlier. Indications for oil were supposedly popping up on the Gosling ranch in Berryessa and in Wooden Valley. So much oil, of so fine a quality, so near the surface, so close to home!

In mid-April, a man from Capell Valley struck oil after drilling down 125'. After that... silence. There were no more big stories in the local papers about oil strikes. There may have been oil there, but somehow most of it vanished before it could come to the surface. The drillers and drifters, surveyors and investors quietly packed up their things and went away. A lot of money had changed hands for nothing, much of it going in legal and professional fees to attorneys.

The second "Oil Rush" began due to persistence, better known as an obsession in this case. Berryessa had long been a frustration to the scores of investors who had hoped to find oil and gas there. One persistent "wildcatters" was Walter B. Griffiths, a Napa realtor, state assemblyman, and self-styled petroleum expert. Like the prospectors who preceded him around the turn of the 20th Century, he had struck modest, short-lived pockets of oil and gas several times in the early 1920's.

When someone claimed to have found oil and coal on the McCormick ranch on Spring Mountain in St. Helena, a rush of speculation started again, and a hatch of new companies appeared. One businessman convinced some Hollywood stars to invest. A moderate-sized company produced about 10 barrels of oil a day, "very high grade and clear as crystal," according to the speculator. But it wasn't enough, and the hole was closed and the riggings were removed.

Local Napa businessmen also bought into the dream. But when a geologist from Los Angeles came to inspect the site, the expert advised folks to pull out. All the other little oil companies that had popped up in Berryessa soon reeled in their cables, too, and disappeared. Convinced that Berryessa would yield oil, the driven Griffiths sank what was at the time the deepest hole ever drilled in Northern California. At 3,710', his 25'-long, heavy steel drilling cable snapped off. The line he used to rescue the cable also broke, and he had to seal the hole with cement. He tried again with another well nearby, but this time it was he who busted. He found a Los Angeles firm that was willing to finish the job on contract, but then the stock market crashed, and no one had the cash to sink into questionable oil well investments.

As before, the only people to profit from Berryessa's gas and oil reserves were the lawyers who drew up the contracts.