

Imagine yourself standing along the bank of the Allegheny River, right here, and watching history happen all around you.

This scenic location was the lookout spot that offered a microcosm of the industrial flow and ebb of this region. Timbering, iron smelting, river commerce, the oil industry, the railroad boom, recreation - it all happened in front of the eyes of anyone who was standing on this river front. The early inhabitants of the turf we stand on were Native Americans who were members of the Senecas, a tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy that claimed the entire Allegheny River Valley. With few exceptions, the upper Allegheny was not traveled much by settlers and the river was used mainly by native Americans and itinerant trappers.

Where we stand was owned by Cornplanter, Chief of the Seneca Indians. Chief Cornplanter was awarded much of the land that now makes up Oil City by the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1791. Cornplanter received the 303 acres for his role in keeping peace between his people and the early American settlers.

By the mid-1820s, the Native Americans had moved out to lands further north. Staying put were a few settlers who tilled small farms and were generally self-sufficient.

It was the river, though, that fueled future commerce and drew in more people to the region.

And in those early years, it was timber that did it.

Timbering was the economic mainstay of northwestern Pennsylvania in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The upper Allegheny River was an integral part of the region's timber industry because of easy river barge transportation, accessible markets and copious amounts of hardwood

stands. Of particular interest were white pine, the wood of choice for sailing ship masts, and hemlock because its bark contained tannin for tanning leather and the wood was in demand for shingles.

River traffic that passed by what would become Oil City featured barges and flatboats steered by poles and oars, keelboats and eventually steamboats. They would carry timber from this area south to markets in Pittsburgh. From Warren to Oil City, more than 400 sawmill operations were doing big business, including those in this part of the river eddy.

Once emptied of the logs, the vessels were loaded up with doors, wagons, chairs, harnesses and headed north to deliver to riverside communities in the north.

Another thriving industry was about to join the river barge traffic and timbering businesses - iron ore smelting.

Venango County got into the iron business rather rapidly, pushed to do so by the growing City of Pittsburgh down river that was in great need of iron for its manufacturing plants turning out train rails and more.

By the late 1840s, there were 32 producing iron furnaces in Venango County and they employed more than 450 men, many of whom lived for several months each year in shanties around the furnaces. This riverside community boasted a bustling iron ore products industry - most of the iron produced in furnaces north of Oil City was destined to be shipped by barge to a large foundry beside the Oil Creek Furnace, located where we are now standing. A large millrace brought water from nearby Oil Creek to the foundry. The iron was manufactured into plow points, stoves and lamps.

And then oil came in 1859 with Drake's successful well

near Titusville. The impact on the small community right here was enormous.

River travel grew with two-way freight: wood and oil going south and commodities going north to supply oil boom towns like Oil City. From 1860 to 1870, there were 20 passenger boats running daily on the Allegheny River. Added to that were more than 3,000 flatboats loaded with barrels of oil from throughout the land that would become the City of Oil City; Steamboats, too, were a familiar sight from this location: the steamboat Petrolia ran several times a week from OC to the Oilopolis oil boomtown. With all that business on the river, how did our city begin to form?;

The first permanent settlers were members of the Halyday family from Huntingdon County in 1803. They bought land, built a log cabin and farmed on a hillside overlooking the river. By 1860, one year after Drake hit oil near Titusville, oil speculators were roaming the hills all around Oil City and lots were being laid out along what would become Main Street.

An April 1865 edition of Harper's Magazine noted: "Oil City consists of only one street, winding down the west side of Oil Creek and the Allegheny River. Informally called Main Street, it contains five or six hotels, all of which are crowded nightly with anxious oil seekers. With all the business being done on one street, the town has a very busy look."

Let's go back to what pieces had to come together to create the City of Oil City: The Halyday and Main street areas were incorporated as the Borough of OC in 1862 - a year later, oilman William L. Lay laid out Bastian Farm in what is now the East end and named his development

Latonia. Just beside Layonia were four other small individual settlements - Albion, Imperial, Dowington and Lee Town.. In 1866, they all came together as Venango City. The oil boom was fueling a major expansion in the new Borough of Oil City across the river and thoughts turned to the new Venango City. A series of negotiations resulted in a merger with the Borough of Oil City and Venango City in 1871 to create the City of Oil City. Still to come would Siverlyville in 1910 and West End Borough in 1916.

Two huge influxes of people swelled the city's population. The wildly successful petroleum industry, an enterprise that ranged from pulling the oil out of the ground to manufacturing the equipment needed to produce and transport oil, drew people to the city. The first significant influx came after the Civil War as discharged soldiers and their families, looking for work, streamed to northwestern Pennsylvania. One of those Union soldiers was Patrick C. Boyle who became an oil scout and eventually bought The Oil City Derrick newspaper, also observing its 150th anniversary this year.

A key role the oil region played in the Civil War drew strong national attention. In the same 1871 year that the City of Oil City was incorporated, there was a one-of-a-kind tribute bestowed on the petroleum industry. Crude oil, produced exclusively at that time just in this region, was vital to the Union in the Civil War. The oil, both in pure form and refined, kept the Army's guns and wagons lubed, its trains running, its lights lit and its soldiers' wounds salved. More importantly, it was a cash treasure for President Lincoln's administration. The region's oil production yielded a huge cash infusion because of a new

occupational tax on oilmen plus another on oil production. So in tribute to the oil industry and at the behest of several prominent Oil city oil barons, President Grant came to western Pennsylvania in September 1871, 150 years ago, to thank the oil industry for playing a vital role in the Civil War. The visit by a sitting president to the city was quite an honor for the community that just six months earlier had celebrated its birth as an incorporated city. Incidentally, it was followed just a few years later by the Liberty Bell, brought to Oil City via a special train en route from Philadelphia to the World's Fair in Chicago. Its visit, too, was the result of hefty lobbying by the local oil industry.

The second spurt in population came from immigrants. Oil City was a destination for immigrants from across Europe because of the city's ample opportunities for work in the oil fields and related industries.. They came from England, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Scotland, Italy and, most particularly, Russia and Poland. Among the first to arrive were Poles who settled in the city beginning about 1898. Oil City also had one of the largest, if not the largest, community of Jewish families in western Pennsylvania and they opened up shops and services throughout the city. So, let's talk about our namesake: OIL

Oil City's booming economy in the late 1800s through the mid-1900s was fueled by the oil and gas industries. The oil industry, plus those ancillary businesses from banks to manufacturing plants to retailers, pumped great wealth into the community. That, in turn, yielded products and people who claimed headlines across the nation, even sometimes around the globe. Oil City residents invented things. They influenced the culture. They served their

nation. They set world records. and much more.

As oil fever spread across the United States and into other countries it wasn't unusual for workers from here to be recruited for jobs in faraway places. Our people, armed with unique talents, opened the oil fields in Russia as well as in Texas. In the late 1870s Oil Well Supply Company in Oil City was asked to find six experienced Pennsylvania oil men to work in the Baku region of Russia. They were guaranteed first class passage and \$120 a month.

Our city was home turf to Pennzoil, Quaker State and wolf's Head, companies that at one time claimed two-thirds of the lubricants sold in the U.S. That was cause for pride and celebration.

In the late 1800s, the city billed itself as The Hub of Oil, thanks in part to more than 150 independent oil producers, numerous banks and the legendary Oil Exchange, and was luxuriating in its incredible good fortunes. A sure sign that money was being made was evident, for example, in the restaurant business, a trade that thrived as it catered to everyone from oil company presidents to drilling rig teams. By 1906, there were 40-plus restaurants in the city. To supply that hefty food trade as well as the manufacturing plants and oil companies, nearly two dozen trains stopped in OC every day. The main freight stations as well as the passenger depot were located right within this area.

PEOPLE

The profusion of wealth in Oil City put the region on the map and drew dignitaries and politicians, athletes and entertainers, to our city. Oil City had an abundance of visits from film stars, world record holder athletes,

inventors, politicians and many others who had gained national fame in one venue or another. The visits were due in large part to wealthy city residents who would ante up funds to pay travel expenses and appearance fees for national figures, ranging from Dom Pedro, Emperor of Brazil to numerous presidential candidates over the years to visit here.

The promise of jobs both in the petroleum industry as well as in those businesses that would support a rapidly growing population drew many individuals who would eventually go elsewhere to claim fame. Examples includes: Alfred Nobel, founder of the Nobel Prizes and inventor of dynamite, who visited the Oil Well Supply plant just up the river in 1879 to tap into talent and technology at the local plant. His brother, Ludvig, was an oil millionaire. Henry J. Heinz, founder of the Heinz food dynasty, came to Oil City in 1863 to manage an ice company his father started. Although intrigued with the oil industry, he didn't stay long and soon left for Pittsburgh.

Military

A keen sense of patriotism plus the know-how to manufacture goods to support the troops were strong in Oil City. The city claimed two air aces - Francis Gabreski and George Carpenter. It boasted one small neighborhood - the old Standard and Stevens Street area near the White Bridge - that in the space of 16 households, all owned by families of Polish heritage, had 45 men actively serving in World War II.

There were tangible one-of-a-kind milestones, too, in Oil City.

- The city boasted the longest tunnel in the U.S. ever bored through solid rock. It was bored through rock at the

base of Hogback Hill on behalf of the Jamestown and Franklin RR. The 909 foot long tunnel was finished in 1870.

The city had two entries in Ripley's Believe it or not - Main Street in the Third Ward boasted the only hotel in the world with all front rooms. The Bellevue House, located directly across from the Center Street bridge, was built against a hillside and was only one room deep.

The second entry was the old Oil City High School on Spring Street. The building, one of the largest high schools in Western Pa. with more than 1,500 students enrolled, was the only building in the world to have four stories that all had exits to a ground level. That was because the back of the school was built right up to a hill.

And we built things:

There was Oil well Supply in Oil City that put out an array of oil field equipment and, in times of war, fashioned anti-aircraft shells and Tommy gun barrels. Just down river in the city's Third Ward, National Transit Co. Pump and Machine Co. manufactured pumps of all sizes for the oil and gas trade as well as pumps for the Panama Canal and U.S. war ships.

The Oil City Boiler works manufactured sturdy boilers, including the heating units for Ellis Island.

Pennzoil, Quaker State and Wolf's Head pumped out millions of barrels of lubricants and fuels, courtesy of the region's rich petroleum industry.

One of the most unusual products to be made in OC were steel boats. The Mullins Boat Co. manufactured several models of steel boats from 1936-42 at its plant in the West End. There were skiff, row boats and power boats. The company grabbed headlines in July 1939 when King

Farouk of Egypt ordered several boats for travel on the Nile. In addition, the boats were also ordered by Czarist Russia but the shipment was hijacked by the Boleschevk rebels who stripped the engines from the boats and used them for practical things, like running sawmills.

Oil City's first 150 years was remarkable in terms of its ingenuity, its culture, its influence. It has a wonderful legacy to build on.