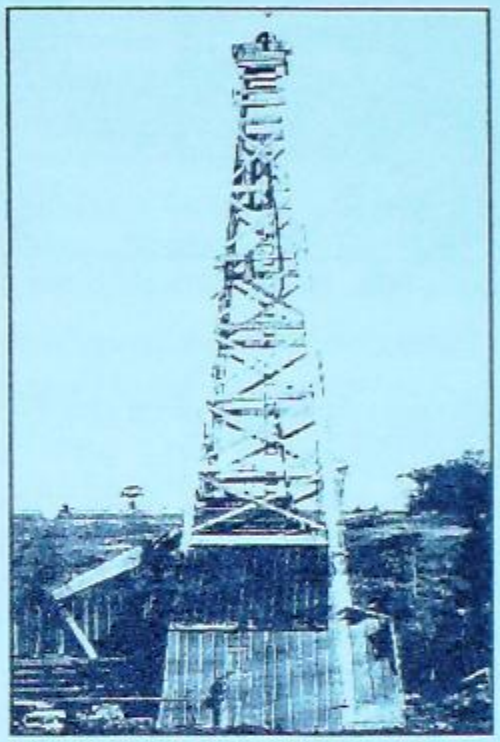
THE
SHIRETOWN CONSERVER
The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society Newsletter

Volume VII, Number 3 **Autumn 2003**

Oil Under Dover?
By Jack Battick

Almost everyone has heard about the oil well that was drilled in South Dover in the 1920's and everyone has a detail to add to the story: the drill hit a pool of very thick, tar-like substance; a Texas oil company still owns the rights to the land, etc. Some people have heard about the well, but don't know when or where it was. Many of the details are folklore, passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. How much of the oil well story can be documented? That's what this article will try to examine.



The Piscataquis Oil Company's well. Photo courtesy *Paper Talks*.

The May 22, 1919 issue of the *Piscataquis Observer* carried a letter from Albion K.P. Merrill under the heading: "Oil Under Dover?" in which Merrill stated that as a youth he had seen a substance come to the surface of a small pond in South Dover that looked like kerosene. Merrill said he had studied "the Geology of Petroleum" and was convinced that what he saw was indeed oil.

Albion Merrill was born in 1844 to Bradbury and Aseneth Blethen Merrill of South Dover. He left Dover before 1870 and in 1880 was living with his wife and son in Waukegan, Illinois keeping a livery stable. By 1900 he was in Minneapolis working as a carpenter, and in 1920 he was a widower and back in Dover giving his occupation in that census as a farmer. He was convinced he could recreate the oil gushers of Pennsylvania in Piscataquis County. The letter to the *Observer* was his first step in that endeavor.

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A little over 8 months later, the *Observer* carried a short filler, possibly with no connection to Albion's idea, explaining that petroleum was believed to be derived from "the fat of fishes, reptiles and animals that lived and died ages ago." But as to the true origin of petroleum, the article concluded, "The subject is wrapped in mystery."

The issue of April 15, 1920 carried an ad by Albion Merrill head, "Wanted, 100 Men" to invest $200 each in order to lease 50 acres of land

(Continues on page 9)

Ghost Noises from the Past
By Louis Stevens

Dover-Foxcroft, listen to some ghost noises from the past!

BONG-BONG-BONG. The bell at Brown's

Brown's Mill. D-F Historical Society collection.

woolen mill rings very deep and slowly this morning, October 15, 1917, not because of the death of anyone working at the mill or fighting in France, but for the death of the Dover post office located in a building in Merrick Square where it has been for 64 years. But the Post Office officials in Washington have ruled it will be transferred to South Street in the same place where the Foxcroft office is also located. Dover folks have been outraged as they will now have to walk that extra distance to get their mail as there is no home delivery yet. The final day of the Dover office will be October 16. So, that's why the mournful sound of the bell so early in the morning.

CREAK-CREAK-CREAK. It's the first day of June 1838, and that noise comes from the second floor of a building in Merrick Square (now the site of Cahill's sporting goods store) where George V. Edes, owner and publisher of the *Piscataquis Herald* (now the *Observer*) is laboriously, but very elatedly, and slowly turning the primitive printing press by hand as he prints the first copies of his 4 page weekly with type brought by him by oxen from Waterville.

TOM-TOM-TOM. Can it be that the Penobscot Indians are staging a war dance what with all the tom-toms being played and whoops being given? No, it's just some members of the Kickapoo tribe from Illinois putting on a show before a large crowd in Monument Square before selling some of their Sagwa Indian Oil and Worm Killer to those gathered here on a warm summer night in 1896.

SMACK-SMACK-SMACK. Not the sound of lips kissing but sounding their approval of what they have just tasted after the men worked hard helping a neighbor friend raise a barn on an autumn day in 1807, their friend being Eliphalet Washburn who has brought back from Bangor on his back a keg of New England rum to help pay them for their assistance.

BANG-BANG-BANG. Hammers are steadily and loudly hitting nails and driving spikes here at the fairgrounds on Fairview Avenue in the mid-summer of 1923 as the carpenters hurry to complete the new baseball grandstand that Colonel Edward J. Mayo is paying for to complement the new baseball diamond in front of it. The stands are in memory of his son George who died while in his early 30's, and who was an excellent athlete at Foxcroft Academy with a special love for baseball.

RIP-RIP-RIP. That's the sound of crowbars, hammers, and ripbars dismantling the old projection booth at the New Star movie theater in the fall of 1929 because new wires are going to be installed and new equipment added in new constructed area because the first "talkie" will be shown on November 1. It will be "Syncopation" starring Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians.

ALL ABOARD! ALL ABOARD! ALL ABOARD! The steamer "Favorite" is loading passengers today, July 23, 1866, from landings

(Continued on page 7)

A Letter from Our Treasurer

Dear Members,

Since the annual financial statement in the last edition of the *Conserver*, some rough times have fallen on the Society. The repair of the Blacksmith Shop roof cost over $2,500, the oil pre-buy for the Museum cost over $2,200, insurance for the buildings came to over $900, the display cabinets, plus transportation, cost $1,400, just to name a few of the more extensive expenditures. Of course, included in the drain on the treasury are the ongoing bills of lights at an average of $20, phone bills of $46 per month, along with a sewer bill of $70, and a water bill of $55.20 each quarter.

In the winter months the light bill can reach as high as $69. In the event some serious repairs or physical corrections are required of the Blacksmith Shop or the Museum we would be hard put to finance them with our current financial status.

I have therefore put a moratorium on further expenses even though the members of the Society are eager to present to the public a Museum worthy of our fine and caring membership. 91 members have not, at this time, sent in their membership dues and they were due in April. Our dividends from the Maine Community Foundation have, in the past, brought in over $600 each quarter. Now they're down to a little over $300 each quarter. Corrections to the foundation of the Blacksmith hop will cost $280. This job is desperately required because the whole building is affected by the sagging foundation. Old buildings don't endure the ravages of time any more than we do.

I have been extremely impressed by the members who have sent in much more than dues money. It pleases me that we have so many Society members who are so generous. As treasurer, I get to see the wonderful outpouring of financial support from the membership. It makes my job that much easier when the bills come in.

But times have been tough lately and we are forced to curtail any future additions or improvements to the Museum and the Blacksmith Shop. This letter is an attempt to explain that there will be a reduction in services, possibly including the Conserver, until we can recoup some of our losses. Printing the newsletter cost $771 last year. Dues received was $783. Agreed, we have made some expenditures that will never be made again, such as the display cabinets, but the normal expenditures for heat, lights, water, and phone will always be there to haunt the treasurer.

Please accept my humble apologies for having to come to you in this manner. We've always been able to bear the brunt of financial adversity, but with a tight economy and less money coming in, it's time to tighten our belts.

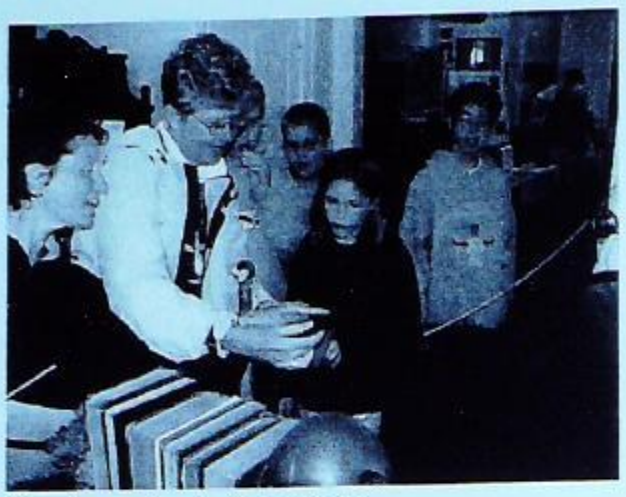
Thank you for hearing me out.

Sincerely,
Jim Annis, Treasurer
The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society

New Members

Irene Thomas	Dover-Foxcroft
Velma Johnston	Dover-Foxcroft
Sharon Phillips	Dover-Foxcroft
Laura-jean Eckard	Dover-Foxcroft
Steve Hildreth	Dover-Foxcroft
Sheila Ruksznis	Dover-Foxcroft
Clifton Roberts	Dover-Foxcroft
Karen & Steve Veit	Dover-Foxcroft
Leilani & Rich Stites	Dover-Foxcroft
Roberta Fitzgerald	New Jersey

Homecoming at the Museum, 2003



Sharing a family's heritage

Learning from an expert

The Washburn siblings pose for a photo

Checking out the new case

Standing Room Only at times

Photos by Jack Battick

The 2003 Homecoming was a great success at the Museum. We had over 97 people who signed the guest register and at least half that many who didn't. Many people told us they had never visited before, but would be back next year to see our changes. The Museum netted over $200 in memberships, sales of throws, donations, and from a booksale. We hope to hold another booksale next year so please save your unwanted books.
Thanks go out to the following people who helped make the day a success: Sharon Phillips, Lou Stevens, Dot Greenlaw, Jim Annis, Jack & Nancy Battick, and a special thank you to Gil Glover for weedwacking around the building.

Back Then
By Madelyn C. Betts

1922. July 6. C.H. Coy erected a pavilion at Sebec Lake for Saturday night dancing. (See page 8 for photo).

1924. Feb. 28. Foxcroft Academy Alumni Association founded.

1925. May 21. J.J. Folsom woodworking mill destroyed by fire, includes Whiting Creamery, ice house, and stables. (Corner of Paul St. & Dwelley Avenue).

1927. Feb. 3. Fire station to be built in Union Square (opened Oct. 27 for use).

1928. Jan. 12. WLBZ "The Voice of the Maine Woods" opens in Bank/Odd Fellows Building, managed by Thompson L. Guernsey.

1929. Oct. 31. Talking pictures make bow at Star Theatre.

1930. Feb. 6. Old Covered Bridge at Essex Street to be modernized after 73 years and Sept. 25, Exchange Hotel in Monument Square coming down after 60 years.

1931. Jan. 8. Chase & Kimball, Texaco agents plan new filling station in Monument Square.

1931. Oct. 22. United Baptist Church completes addition.

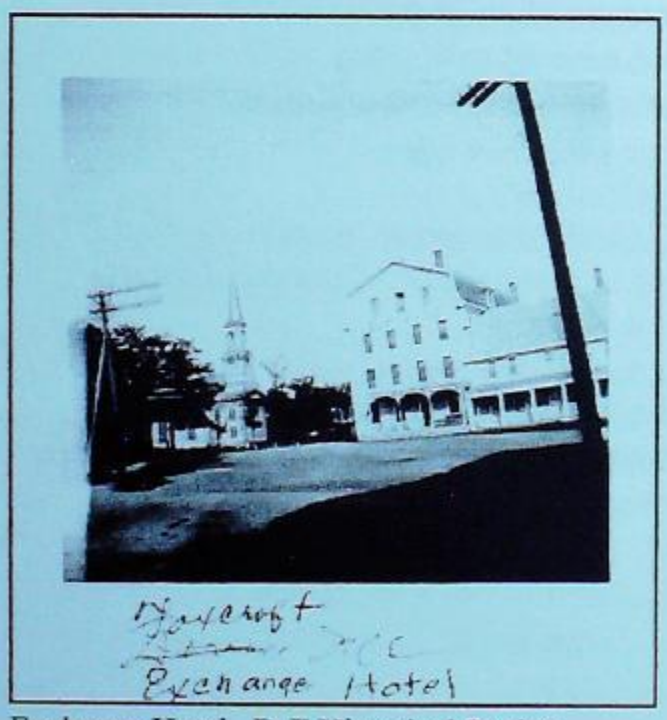
1932. June 9. Maine Central Railroad discontinues passenger service to Newport, busses to provide service.

1933. Jan. 5 & 12. Loaded truck breaks through the ice at Sebec Lake. Owned by Raymond P. Davis, loaded with white birch. Truck salvaged by 20-30 men, taking 5 days and 200 hours of work to get it back on the road again.

1934. Oct. 11. Arthur W. Hall retires. Undertaking business sold to Harold Lary of Skowhegan.

1938. June 23. Cornerstone laid at $70,000 new Post Office.

1938. Mar. 17. Dover-Foxcroft selects town manager form of government.



Exchange Hotel. D-F Historical Society collection.

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Correction: Joyce Johnston Dean wrote with information on the names of the FA Girls Club Photo (see *Conserver,* Summer 2003). The caption should read as follows: Front row: Esther Whitman, Phyllis Jones, Margaret Blood, Virginia Gray. Back Row: Rachel Alden, Berl Brown, Kay Myers, Priscilla Johnston. Thank you Joyce for helping us identify these young women.

The Blacksmith Shop got a much-needed roofing job this spring. In keeping with its historic character cedar shingles were used. Photo by Jack Battick.

Madelyn's "Townies"

Madelyn C. Betts & carte d'visite collection. June 2003. Photo by Jack Battick.

In June Madelyn C. Betts gave a presentation on a photo collection originally started by the late Francis Peakes, which he called his "townies". Madelyn also gave a presentation on the development of photography in the area and included a brief bio of many of the known photographers who lived and worked in the two towns.

Steve Rainsford added to the evening by bringing in some of his collection of local photos to share.

Madelyn's material on photographers was turned into a handout available to visitors at the Museum this summer.

Ghost Noises

(continued from page 2)

along the south shore of Sebec Lake to take them to the head of the lake where the blueberry picking is the best in many years. No need to take anything to eat because the new hotel, built by Blethen & Gilman, will be open with its excellent diningroom. So hurry, hurry, as we don't want to be left waiting on the dock.

GRR! GRR! GRR! Lions, Tigers, Leopards, Panthers? All roaring and growling here in Dover on September 20, over 160 years ago in 1840? Of course, because it's Raymond's Zoological exhibition where folks can see these jungle animals for the 25 cent admission. Four huge elephants have hauled the wagons containing the exhibition into town since this is long before the first train will come in 1869.

CLICK-CLICK-CLICK. Why, that sounds like billiard balls "kissing" each other as the two players silently shoot their game of pool at the old Piscataquis Club in Monument Square on a snowy day in the winter of 1934. Both of these two long-time businessmen in Dover & Foxcroft have been retired for some years now, but they still meet most afternoons for their game of pool. One is John Hughes of Dyer & Hughes and then Hughes & Son organ and piano factory fame. He is 93, and the other is Charles Dyer Paine, who had clothing stores here for 57 years. He's the younger of the two at just 91.

TAP-TAP-TAP. No mistaking that sound and its origin - it's a violin in the right hand of Harley Warren who has just hit the back of his fiddle as a signal to the orchestra he's leading to open the summer dance season on a May night in 1930 at Coy's dance pavilion at Greeley's Landing with a foxtrot to get the blood circulating.

Harry Coy built his dance pavilion in the summer of 1922. Its dimensions were 40 x 80 with a piazza 10 x 90 running along the side facing the lake. A Delco system furnished the electricity. Years ahead it would be converted into a roller skating rink. Photo courtesy of the author.

NOTE: This article is reprinted through the courtesy of the *Dexter Gazette* where it first appeared.

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Editor's Corner

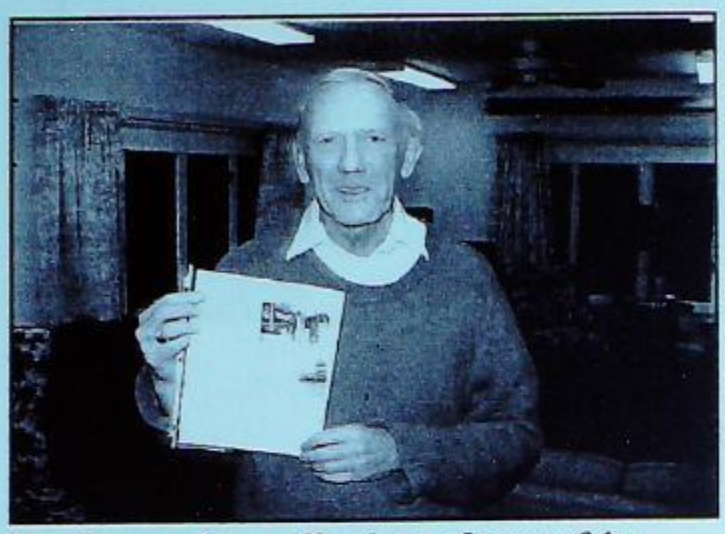
I want to thank all of the members who've sent notes and e-mails telling me how much you enjoy the *Conserver*. Please keep letting me know your suggestions, criticisms, and interests.

You can reach me at battick@midmaine.com or at 308 Foxcroft Center Road, D-F. Telephone 207-564-3576.

And, a tip of my hat to the following for their contributions to this issue: Jim Annis, Mary Annis, Madelyn C. Betts, Lou Stevens, Jack Battick.

Nancy Klimavicz Battick

Racing in His Blood



Lou Stevens shows off a photo of some of the family's champions. Photo by Jack Battick.

Society member Lou Stevens kicked off the programs for 2003 with a talk on his family's experiences raising and racing thoroughbreds.

Lou shared photos and documents as well as tales about the horses themselves and his own memories of witnessing the lively sport of harness racing in the state of Maine.

Many of the audience could remember watching harness racing though no one recalled the once-active racing that took place on the old Fairgrounds (on Park Street).

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The Society's Unknown

We're in the process of cataloging the Society's extensive photo collection. There are literally hundreds of unidentified individual and group photos in our collection. Do you recognize this man? His cabinet photo was included in an album which may have belonged to an Averill family member. If you know who he is, please let us know. We'll print other unknowns in future issues of the *Conserver*.

The Society's Much Needed

The Society is in need of several items. If you've any of the following you could donate please contact Nancy Battick at 564-3576.

Old sheets or tablecloths (for dust covers)
metal or plastic shelving
office furniture
3 ring binders (in good condition)
file cabinets

Oil in Dover **(from page 1)**

whereon to drill in search of oil.

Merrill's appeal resulted by August of that year in the formation of the Piscataquis Oil Company with himself as one of 10 directors. Officers of the company were A.O. Campbell, president, G.L. Arnold, treasurer, and Frank E. Guernsey, clerk, and with an initial capitalization of $10,000. Other directors included such prominent local men as A.O. Robbins. Francis C. Peakes, John F. Sprague, E.J. Mayo, A.P. Dow, and W.B. Blethen. At first, it was incorrectly reported that the company had leased 300 acres of land (later corrected to 50) near Norton Hill. An oil driller was sought in Pennsylvania to start work as soon as possible. The land in question, it was stated, was underlain by slate similar to the land in Pennsylvania and Texas where oil was even then being exploited. The leased 50 acres belonged to Mr. Merrill and we can presume it was near the small pond where he spotted what he believed was kerosene. By October newspapers reported that the company had duly filed papers of incorporation with the Maine Secretary of State.

The spirit of the 1920's economic boom was definitely alive in Piscataquis County. In 1921, the *Observer* carried an editorial calling for imaginative, enterprising men to assist in the economic development of the county. Ads ran promoting stock offerings in such companies as Central Maine Power.

In April 1921 the oil company directors met at South Dover and placed an order with the firm of Hathorn & Son to saw timber for

Albion K.P. Merrill. Date of photo unknown. Photo courtesy of *Paper Talks*.

the drilling tower. In May, the company hired D.J. Collier of Pennsylvania to superintend the drilling and appropriate machinery was ordered.

Evidently, the initial capitalization of the venture was found to be inadequate, for at the May 1921 directors' meeting, it was voted to increase the number of stockholders to 200. Work at the site continued and the machinery arrived in late July. A diesel-powered generator was installed and by mid-August drilling in earnest began. Meanwhile all the activity near Norton Hill became a local phenomenon. Hundreds of people flocked to the site on Sundays, so many that an area woman opened a refreshment stand nearby. The *Observer* reported that a lot of ice cream was sold to the curious bystanders.

Drilling proceeded round the clock and by the end of August the drill had reached a depth of 250 feet. The drilling itself was accomplished by the primitive method of dropping a heavy steel bit several feet onto the rock and soil beneath it, the same technique still used by some water well

drillers today. A gasoline or diesel engine raised and lowered one end of a rocker arm, at the other end of which a rope attached to the drill bit was suspended. Soon, however, the rope broke leaving the drill bit at the bottom of the hole and work was suspended for 2 weeks for equipment to be shipped from Pittsburgh to recover the bit. By the end of September, drilling had reached 400 feet, but was suspended in mid-December at 1,700 feet due to cold weather.

In March 1922 a new preferred stock offering was made at a par value of $100 per share. 49 individuals and firms subscribed. While the majority came from Dover-Foxcroft, 8 were from Bangor, 6 from other parts of Maine, and 1 from Boston. Liston P. Evans of the *Observer* Publishing Company was one of the subscribers. (The original document containing the subscribers' names and signatures is in the archive collection of the D-F Historical Society).

Work on the drilling site resumed in June and over the next month hopes for success were raised as one after another encouraging sign was reported in the press. At 1,760 feet a "pocket of gas" was found and 30 feet farther "a nine foot vein of hard coal" was reported. By the end of July, the drill was at 2,000 feet and another pocket of gas and vein of coal was reported. Dwight Merrill, great-grandnephew of Albion, says that the bore hole had become crooked causing the drill rope to break frequently. At that point the driller installed a steel casing pipe in the well. In the photo on page 1 a rack of casing pipe can be seen beside the engine shed. Today casing is installed as drilling proceeds to keep the bore hole clear and to act as a conduit for flushing out drilling debris, as well as forcing the drill to move in a straight line.

From late July 1922, mention of the drilling operation disappears from the pages of the *Observer*. Lou Stevens in his history of Dover-Foxcroft says that drilling was halted again in October that year. Through 1923-24 the newspaper is quiet on the matter. At the same time Albion Merrill is no longer mentioned in meetings of the directors and there were changes in the company officers. Liston Evans was among the directors who voted to try to raise more capital to keep the operation going. Albion Merrill is reported to have died on April 25, 1925.

Drilling resumed in May 1925 and the depth of the hole was reported to be 2,461 feet. Very hard rock was encountered and only 20 feet were made good in 2 days of drilling. The stock offer may have met with a cool reception because work around the clock ceased and drilling was done on a half-day basis with a single crew. But bad luck continued: the drill boss fell from the tool shed roof and broke his nose and the drill bit was once against lost in the hole at around 2,500 feet, nearly half a mile into the earth.

This seems to have been the last straw for no further reports of the work appears in the pages of the *Observer* for some time. When next mentioned it is in connection with the suicide of Frank Shaw of Dover-Foxcroft who was found hung in "the boiler house" on Monday, July 13, 1926, his automobile parked nearby. A note reportedly found in the car "stated that his affairs were in bad shape and that he had little to live for."
(Continued on next page)

MESSAGE FROM MARY

As we begin to wind down our 2003 season, we find many visitors have come to our museums. Homecoming Weekend (see page 4) found the Observer Building buzzing with activity. Our hosts, Dot Greenlaw and Lou Stevens, were busy all day. It was good to see so many interested people. We have two new-to-us display cases purchased through generous donations from Dot Greenlaw and the Odd Fellows (thanks to member, Cliff Wiley). We also thank Dave's World for the loan of their truck and two of their delivery men who helped transport the cabinets from Abbot to the museum.

Fall will soon be upon us and the Observer Building will close for the winter after September 28. I send a huge thank you to all who hosted. All the feedback was positive and those folks had a good time with the hosting. We will be closed, but any member who might need a tour for a visitor is welcome to call an officer. We'll be happy to open up.

Mary Annis, President

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Oil **(continued from page 10)**

The dream of finding oil in Dover died as well. On December 26 1926 the last of the casing was shipped to Portland to be sold. The undertaking was a total loss to the shareholders, though some expressed regret that drilling couldn't have gone to a depth to prove conclusively that oil couldn't be found.

But was there ever a real chance? I spoke to Professor Stephen Norton of the University of Maine's geology department, who explained that the bed rock in the South Dover vicinity consists of a thin layer of Devonian rock (mainly sandstone and limestone) above a thick layer of Silurian limestone and pelite.

Norton explained that fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas are found in and above rock from the Carboniferous Era, the period that came *after* the Devonian. They derive from the breakdown of land plants whose carbon-based substance is transformed by pressure, heat, and time into the fuels we burn today. Since there were no land plants in the Silurian period, fossils fuels could not be found under Norton Hill. As for reports of coal deposits, Professor Norton concluded that should a thick seam of coal exist below ground, it should appear as an outcropping somewhere in Maine and no outcropping has ever been found.

Thus, the dream of an oil boom in Piscataquis County was doomed to fail and no gusher such as that on the back cover would ever come in here. But the story of men who chased the source of that "substance" that looked like kerosene on the surface of a small pond in South Dover deserve their place in our local history.

NOTE: The author would like to thank Dwight Merrill, Professor Stephen Norton, Louis Stevens, Madelyn C. Betts, Pierre Dumont, and the Dexter Historical Society for assisting with this article.

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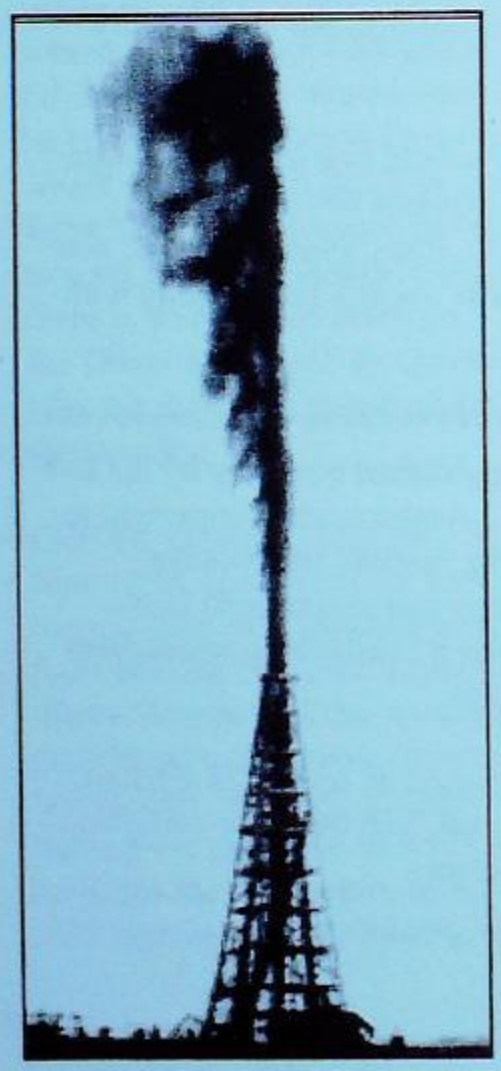

The Great War was over . . . The Roaring Twenties & the Jazz age were around the corner . . . Business in America was booming . . . Maine's potential for black gold was about to be uncovered . . . Anything was possible . . . or was it?

Find out why Dover never became the Houston of Maine on page 1

Vintage photo courtesy Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc.