

Unique museum salutes industry pioneers

History of oil exploration documented in Edmonton

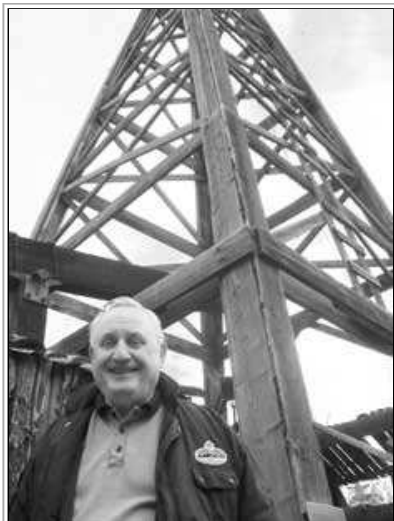
By Maurice Tougas - For Business Edge
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As every good Albertan knows, oil was discovered at Leduc No. 1 on February 13, 1947, launching the modern Alberta energy-based economy.

But the history of oil exploration in Canada goes back 90 years before that, and it wasn't even in Alberta. The appropriately named Oil Springs, Ont., was home to Canada's first working oil well, way back in 1858. The deepest they could dig was 400 feet, and the rig was little more than a tree trunk and a length of chain, but this primitive machine marked the beginning of the oil industry in Canada.

The replica spring-pole rig (forerunner of the cable-tool rig) is the first artifact in the history of oil exploration, large pieces of which are on display at the Edmonton Oilfield Technical Society (OTS) museum. The simple wooden contraption – which required strong-legged men with lots of stamina to operate – sits in the shadow of and in sharp contrast to the towering Nabors Rig No. 10, the end result of nearly 100 years of oil exploration.

These rigs from opposite ends of the historic spectrum are just two of more than 60 exhibits housed at the OTS park museum, the baby of former OTS president Stan Kondratiuk.



Maurice Tougas photo, Business Edge
Stan Kondratiuk and his prize, the replica of the cable-tool rig he unearthed.

"There's more than 145 years of oil history here," says Kondratiuk, as he surveys the nine-acre site in a secluded park in Edmonton's far south.

Without Kondratiuk's dedication to the preservation of oil industry equipment, most of the park's exhibits would either be rusting in a farmer's field or sold for scrap years ago.

Kondratiuk, 75, has a near-encyclopedic knowledge of oil technology and equipment, earned during a long oilpatch career that began in 1950.

"I know pretty well every phase of the oil industry," says Kondratiuk, who started off in Drayton Valley looking after supplies for 16 rigs. He's worked on the Amoco Crossfield gas plant, spent some time in experimental tar sands development, and even a summer on the Grand Banks during a 30-year career with Amoco. The former schoolteacher retired at 58 to go into consulting ("I corrected all my errors," he chuckles.)

It was while serving as a board member of the Edmonton Oilfield Technical Society that he came up with the idea to create a museum to salvage the heavy metal history of the oil industry.

The sprawling park contains artifacts from all sectors of the petroleum industry, from seismic and exploration to drilling, production and transportation.

Beginning with its first exhibit – a nitrogen-pumping unit built in the 1960s – the museum is a repository of the methods and mechanics of oil exploration. There's something from every decade: A casing head used in Turner Valley in the early 1900s; the cable-tool rig from 1915; a water-well cable-tool rig from the '20s; a blowout preventer from the '30s; a diesel engine from the '40s; a gravel-compaction unit from the '50s, etc.

Kondratiuk has personally approved every piece of equipment on display, travelling as far north as Fort McMurray and as far south as the U.S. border to follow leads and check on the condition of potential artifacts.

While most of the exhibits at the museum are donations, it took some hard-nosed sleuthing to find one of the museum's first and most historically important exhibits, the remains of a cable-tool rig.

In the early days of oil exploration, would-be oil barons took major financial risks in search of black gold.

One such firm was the Northern Production Company of Edmonton, owned by entrepreneur A.F.A. Coyne. His company bought a rig from Pennsylvania and hauled it north to Fort McMurray, at the junction of the House and Athabasca rivers. It took from 1915 to 1918 to assemble the rig, but it found no more than a few dollops of oil. The company went broke, and the rig was abandoned in 1919.

However, a company report contained a photo of the location taken from the top of the rig. In 1979, Kondratiuk and Fin Lineham tracked down the exact spot by helicopter by matching the photo to the location where it had been taken. They found the remains of the wooden rig, which had rotted away. But the metal was still there, rusted but salvageable. Six helicopter loads were needed to haul the tons of metal to Edmonton. A replica of the rig was one of the museum's first exhibits when it officially opened in 1981, and it now sits at the entrance to the park.

The OTS (then the Canadian Oilfield Technical Society) itself was formed in 1951 by Alberta oil legend Jack Gallagher. In the days before post-secondary institutions offered technical training, the small contingent of Edmonton oilfield technologists needed some way to compare notes and improve their knowledge.

"They got to know who knew what and when they got into a problem, they knew who to contact," says Kondratiuk.

Over the years, as NAIT and SAIT came into being and oilfield technology became more sophisticated, the OTS changed into "more of a social thing", says current president Gil Bourgeois.

There are 600 current members, down from last year's 750, says Bourgeois. The jewel of the society is the Fin Lineham Pavilion, named after the late oilpatch entrepreneur and farmer who donated the land for OTP Park. The pavilion can seat about 700, but the grounds have been known to host oil industry shindigs of more than 4,000.

There is still plenty of room for more exhibits at the museum. If you know of any oil artifacts that may deserve a permanent resting place in a museum (there is a shortage of seismic equipment), call Kondratiuk at (780) 447-4119, or OTS vice-president Barry Moore at (780) 955-9420. Although the park is closed to the general public, visitors are welcome on Sundays.

The museum is located at OTS Centennial Park, a half-mile south of Ellerslie Road on 156th Street.