

**THE GREAT
CONROE OIL FIELD**

The story of the dramatic discovery of oil in the mighty Conroe field, and the man who found it, and proved it

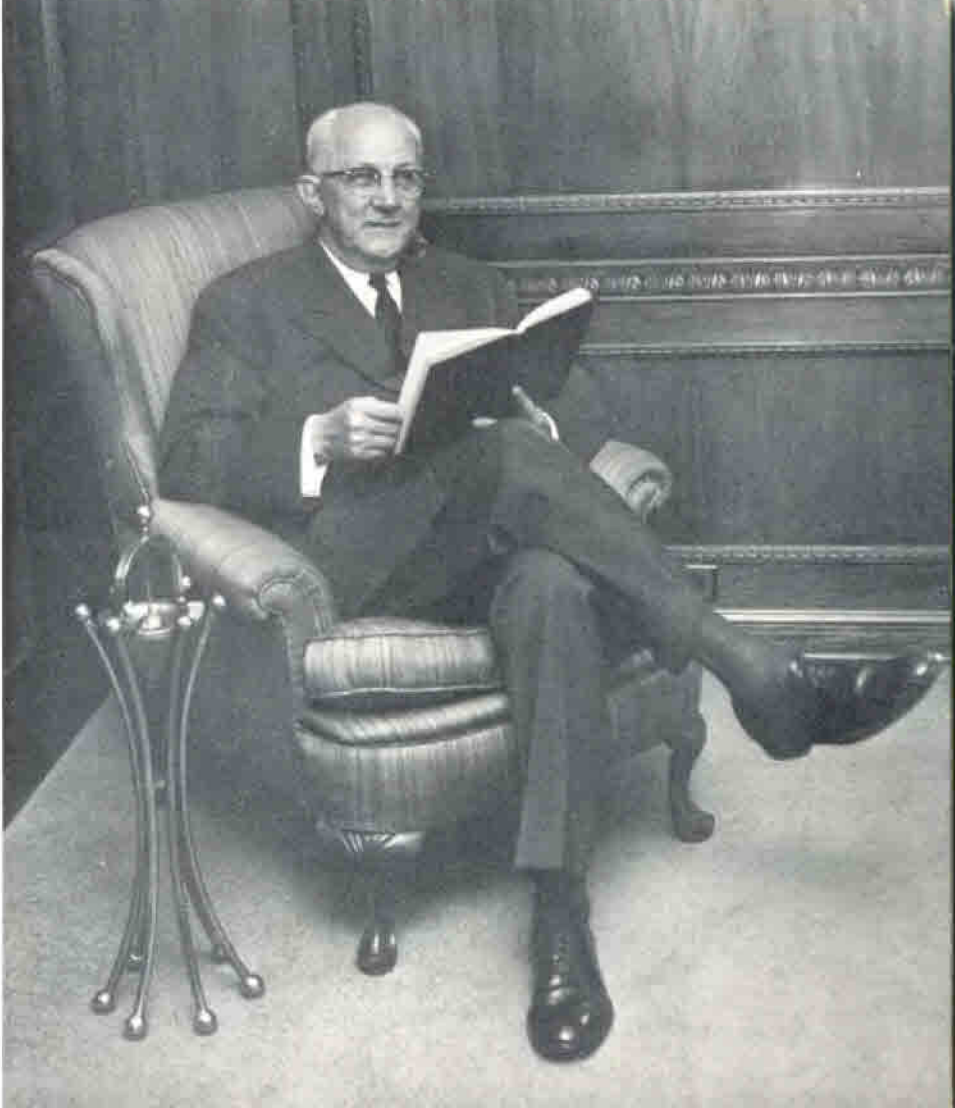
GEORGE W. STRAKE

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BY PATRICK O'BRYAN

GEORGE W. STRAKE

*He visioned an empire,
dared to seek it, and
discovered it in the
Conroe Oil Field.*



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In Recognition . . .

Oil has traced a fantastic pattern of adventure across the whole of the great state of Texas. But nowhere is its dramatic impact on a community, and on the times, more clearly illustrated than at Conroe. Here, the story becomes a truly magnificent episode in the history of oil because it is also the story of one man who not only discovered oil at Conroe, but had to come back and drill a second time to prove to a skeptical world that his first find was not an isolated freak. The story of The Great Conroe Oil Field is by necessity the story of that one man who treaded alone the pathway to renown, distinction and fortune, sometimes without so much as the solace of a word of encouragement. It is the story of George W. Strake, to whom Conroe owes undivided gratitude for everything that it is today.

His second well—the one that proved to the world the vastness and greatness of the Conroe field—was brought in on June 5, 1932.

To the 25 years of increasing recognition and prosperity that have followed for Conroe in its wake, and to George W. Strake to whom all credit is due, this history is respectfully dedicated.

There are many in Conroe today who were here during those first glorious days of oil and new-found prosperity. To them also, and to the memories it will awaken for them, we also wish to dedicate this history.

It could not have been written without the help and assistance of many of them.

The author especially wishes to recognize these "oldtimers" who have remained with Conroe through the years since oil was discovered and today form the very backbone of the community:

B. D. Griffin, Charles Harritt, Jr., W. F. Newton, E. I. Conroe, E. C. Wooldridge, J. C. Wahrenberger, Britt Freeman, Guy Hooper, F. W. Woodson, R. C. Carter, O. Etheridge, M. W. Everett, Reagan Smith, Dr. J. L. Hicks, J. J. Heard, Fred Nutter, Tony Rosner, and others.

And finally, to L. G. Smith, Manager of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, who untiringly aided in the preparation of The Great Conroe Oil Field, my sincere appreciation.

PATRICK O'BRYAN

The Author . . .

Patrick O'Bryan, the author of this history, is a reporter for the Houston Press, a working newspaperman who by profession and inclination preserves each day a portion of the glorious heritage of Texas. A former editor and publisher of weekly newspapers in several sections of the state, Mr. O'Bryan has won both state and national honors for community service, and for editorial and column writing. Because of his knowledge of this area, his interest in Conroe's development, and his familiarity with the petroleum industry carried over from childhood days spent in the midst of a vast oil-producing area, he was especially commissioned by the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce to re-trace the discovery of the Great Conroe Oil Field and portray here those historic moments when it came into being.

The Great Conroe Oil Field

In the year of 1881, between the San Jacinto and the Trinity Rivers, where the timber grew so thick and so tall that it was hours after dawn before it became daylight, a giant figure of a man stood one day and, with feet spread wide, planted his stake into the earth.

And after him there came other men, who battled the tall giants of the forest and brought them tumbling down, who cleared the land and built houses, and roads and walks connecting the houses.

The railroads came—crossing at a point not far from where the first man had driven his stake.

And where the railroads crossed, where the east passed on its way west and met the north on its way south, they built their town.

That man, who came first and made the beginning, was Isaac Conroe. After him they named their town—Conroe.

The trees were so tall and their shadows so long that men confronted by them were blinded by them. The trees became life to the living, yet he lived best who destroyed the trees the fastest.

From the start, Conroe became a city of destiny.

It was only eight years old, with only two or three hundred people, when it was voted the County Seat of Montgomery County.

Pestilence struck with the turn of the century, but the toll of the grim reaper could not halt Conroe in its strides toward the future.

Fire destroyed the town in 1901, but the men and women who were there, and others who were coming in to join them, went to work to build it back up again . . .

Only to have fire again strike down their efforts.

Undaunted, they all got together and built it back up again . . . this time to stay.

It spread and it grew and soon there were a thousand people in Conroe.

And for every mouthful of food, for every new dress or new pair of boots, another tree came tumbling down, and another, and another . . .

And when they were coming down the fastest, the timber lining the sides of the two railroads formed a great cross—the altar of sacrifice to the vitality of life.

But there is a point where only so many trees can be cut in a day, and sawed in a day, and shipped out in a day, and in the mid-twenties Conroe's timber-cutters reached that point.

The trees were beginning to be a little harder to find and a little harder to get to the mill, and a man had to work harder and longer every day to get clothes for his back, bread and milk for his wife and babies.

Conroe's growth had already halted.

Thinking men were wondering how the future would deal with this stripling which had grown while other towns in the county had dwindled to a near nothingness.



Alvin Rodgers



Ed Graham



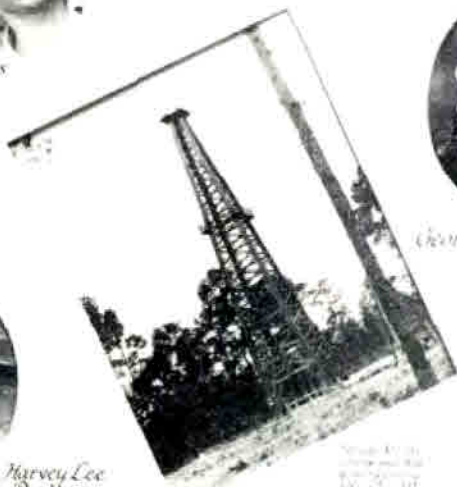
W. W. Boles



Henry Duffa



C. E. Morgan



George W. Strake



Harvey Lee Driller



Ed LaCose Driller



Charlie Donovan



Birt Donovan



W. J. Pfiffner Jr.



Dick Evans



Otis Donovan

This mounted composite hangs on the wall of George W. Strake's office in Houston, keeping alive the Strake Number 1 and Strake Number 2, and the people who brought them into being.

Would Conroe, after all, be only another sawmill town, booming so long as the saws whirred in screaming frenzy, then dying when the blades were stilled, unused, or moved on to another timberland?

This vital question was already being pondered when the fateful year of 1929 dawned.

It was a year that began with the country at the highest peak of prosperity in all its history . . .

And ended with the country sunk into the throes of despair as the greatest depression of all time cast a shadow over the land like a huge, menacing storm cloud that blots out the sun and brings darkness at high noon.

One by one the sawmill whistles stopped blowing.

One by one the train wheels stopped clicking, and the miles of once sparkling sidetrack began to show a cover of rust while the weeds grew up and covered the crossties.

Jobs were hard to get, and the lines of jobless grew every day.

Some took their families and moved. Others who had no place to go stuck on, grubbing a hand-to-mouth existence where they could. Once prosperous Conroe suffered from unemployment, and business dwindled to the breaking point.

Idleness had become a disease afflicting the entire populace.

In 1930, Conroe withered on the vine, inert and listless.

In 1931, a few hardy souls stirred at news that Kelly-Baker was active, west of Conroe, again. The advent of some drilling crews and the few speculators who wandered over from East Texas to look things over brought in some badly needed dollars,

but their dollars were quickly picked up and Conroe settled back to the doldrums again.

Times were still bad.

Like the rest of the country, Conroe was paralyzed, gripped firmly by the inertia of depression. Some said that if Kelly-Baker hit there was hope. But then, a man never knew for sure what was coming next, and the way things looked it was sure to be bad. And weren't things bad enough already?

That was Conroe in August of 1931, when again the figure of a man came striding out of obscurity to stand—as had Isaac Conroe many years before—with feet widespread and lips firmly pressed as he planted a stake into the earth.

Not big in stature, but seeming bigger for an almost mystical air of resolution and indefatigable determination, this man drove his stake farther and farther into the ground until it had pierced the innards of a sleeping monster who would awaken with a roar that would shake the countryside, a monster who would belch trillions of cubic feet of natural gas and spit up millions of barrels of black, rich crude oil—that would awaken Conroe from its doldrums to a rip-roaring prosperity the like of which had never been seen there before.

That day, as he planted his stake into the ground, he stood alone.

He had come alone to pace off the boundaries of his location, to spot the direction for a road to reach the highway, and to picture in his mind the boilers, the water tank, the pipe racks, and the other essentials of drilling an oil well.

He came in the morning and he worked all day, occasionally

stopping to rest on the seat of his car which was parked in the cool shade of a tree, and to drink from a jug of water he had brought with him.

It was late evening when he finished. He put his maps back in his car and wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his sweat-soaked shirt. Then he stood again in the opening to tick off in his mind the essentials that had been accomplished. He turned not to face the setting sun, but rather with his back to it, facing in the direction of the sun which would rise again and bring with it a new day.

For that was the way he saw things—and sees them yet.

He stood quietly, for he was praying. Then finished, he pulled his hat firmly on his head, set his jaw, and drove away in his car . . .

Alone.

One man, who had just completed the most momentous day in the history of Conroe.

That man was George W. Strake.

A Man From Missouri

George W. Strake was born in St. Louis, Mo., in 1894.

His father died before he was a year old. His mother died when he was at the age of eight.

He grew up under the watchful eye of three older sisters, but it was not many years before he was learning the ways of the world and was making his way in it.

While making excellent grades in St. Louis public schools, he worked at different jobs after school hours, and during the summer months, and managed to save enough money to pay his entrance into St. Louis University when he graduated.

He worked his way through college, "doing any odd job that would pay some money," and in 1917 graduated with a degree of Bachelor of Science, having majored in Commerce and Finance.

He had to wait a year to put that knowledge into good use—like other young men of his age group, he got caught up in the noble experiment somebody called, "The war to end all wars."

It was after his discharge from the Army Air Corps that he set about to explore the possibilities of the oil business for a young man who had plenty of energy, acumen, and the desire to get rich.

He started off by taking a job in Tampico, Mexico, with the Mexican-Gulf Oil Co., a subsidiary of the Gulf Oil Co. of Pittsburgh.

It was early in the year 1919 and he was just 24 years old.

His starting salary with Gulf Oil Co. for \$450 per month. "I was indeed thrilled and wondered how long that kind of easy money had been floating around," Strake was to recall years later.

His first thoughts were to live frugally, save his money, and return to the United States with a stake of \$2,000.

But George W. Strake, even then, as he was at Conroe, as he is now, was a "loner."

There was too much security, and not enough excitement in working for a salary.

"I went looking for the thrills and romance that go along with working to make life endurable," said Mr. Strake.

He left Gulf within two years, using his savings to begin independent lease trading and shoe-string drilling.

"It was a peculiar operation.

"The major companies in Mexico at that time were eager to assist independents. They were happy to see every wildcat that was drilled.

"They'd give you tips that would send you on a lease-trading spree. You could always pick up a rig and a crew to drill a wildcat. When you needed something you could borrow it from one of the majors, and if it looked like you had a good thing, they'd come in and buy you out before you finished the well," said Mr. Strake.

In that easy-going atmosphere, he had run up a fortune of something like \$250,000 before he was 28 years old.

He was 29 when he came to Houston in 1924 and married Miss Susan Kehoe, a native Houstonian, and took her back with him to Mexico.

But the boom was nearing a stabilization point and independents in Mexico were not having it so good. George Strake took a look at his nest egg and decided what he needed was a new location and a new outlook.

One thing he knew.

He was now definitely committed to oil as his life's work.

The oil bug had bitten him and the sting was deep.

Never again would he be anything but a man with an earthly quest whose sole satisfaction would come from the stinging whine of the rotary drill and the thrill of taking from the earth its hoard of black oil, releasing it for the use and benefit of himself and mankind.

George Strake was never satisfied with little things.

Whatever life had to offer him, he wanted it big—something the outside world could see was as big as the drive that was pushing him from within.

He wanted to be a discoverer, a pace-setter, an influence in the world and the things about him. . . . He did not want to be poor all his life—

So he would look for oil.

Where?

Where no one else had looked.

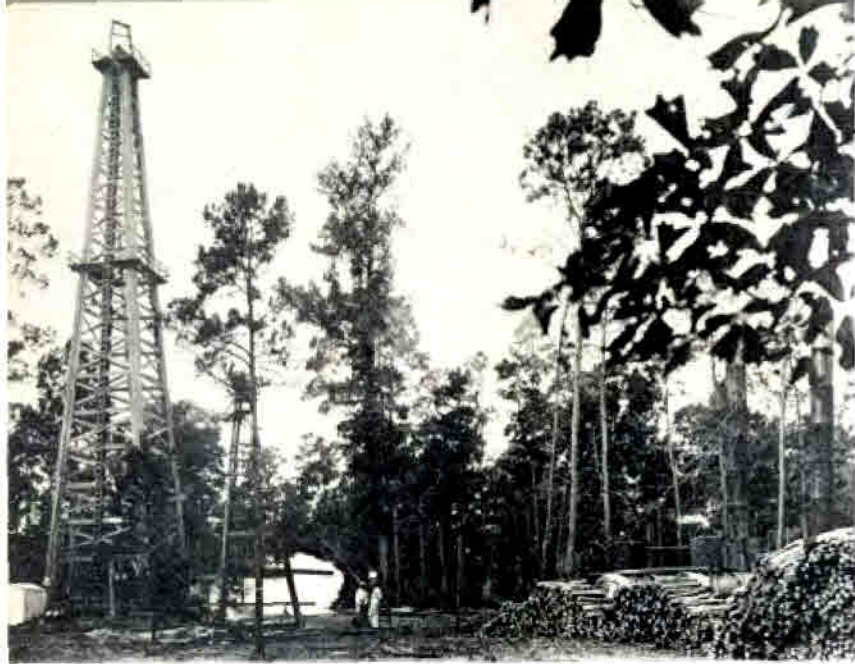
And where might that be?

He put a finger on a map and under his finger was a tiny island in the Caribbean.

Cuba.

"This was to be my fairy land of fortune.

"In 1925, Mrs. Strake and I moved to Havana, Cuba. I was primed to set the world on fire and I envisioned myself making \$50 million. I sincerely thought that there existed on the island of Cuba great but little known, undrilled oil fields. I had visions of becoming not only a financial giant, and a powerful figure in the producing end of the business, but a great refiner of gasoline."



The George W. Strake No. 1, Southwest Development Co., the discovery well of the gigantic Conroe field. It broke a record by going 5000 feet on wood-burning boilers. Skeptics of the day said it couldn't be done, but Strake did it.

He remembers that it was his plan to compete on the retail level with imported American gasoline.

"American gasoline was selling at filling stations in Havana for just a little under 40 cents a gallon. I had it all figured

out. Before long, I would control the oil and gasoline business in Cuba."

As a sideline, to pay his living expenses he thought, he took on a Hupmobile automobile agency.

"It just shows you that I had learned just enough to be stupid.

"I hit Cuba just as the bottom dropped out of the sugar industry, throwing Cuba into the worst depression of its history."

If Mr. Strake had hit oil, he might have been able to refine it cheaply. But nobody could have bought it because nobody had any money. And all the cars he thought he'd sell—nobody even came around to look at them.

George Strake hadn't been conditioned by life to be a quitter.

He took the stacked deck that was handed him in Cuba and played the hand out.

For two years, with Mrs. Strake giving him encouragement and ever-standing behind him, he fought desperately against the stagnated state of the automobile business, against the apathy of the people who would be benefitted if he succeeded.

But when the money began to get low, and disaster was imminent, George Strake had to take his wife and daughter into consideration. It was either sell out while there was still something to sell, and book passage for home, or fight on to the bitter end—bankruptcy—and maybe swim home.

He doesn't talk much today about that bitter decision.

But the record shows that Cuba is the only major defeat George Strake ever suffered in his entire career.

He sold out his business for what it would bring, taking a financial beating, and in October of 1927, he and his family arrived back in Houston.

He was still a man much alone in the world.

He was too, perhaps, now a more humble man. Cuba had taught him that disaster was not exclusively the reward of ignorance or poor planning. Failure, he had found, could come to any man, unexpectedly, and through means over which he himself had no control whatsoever.

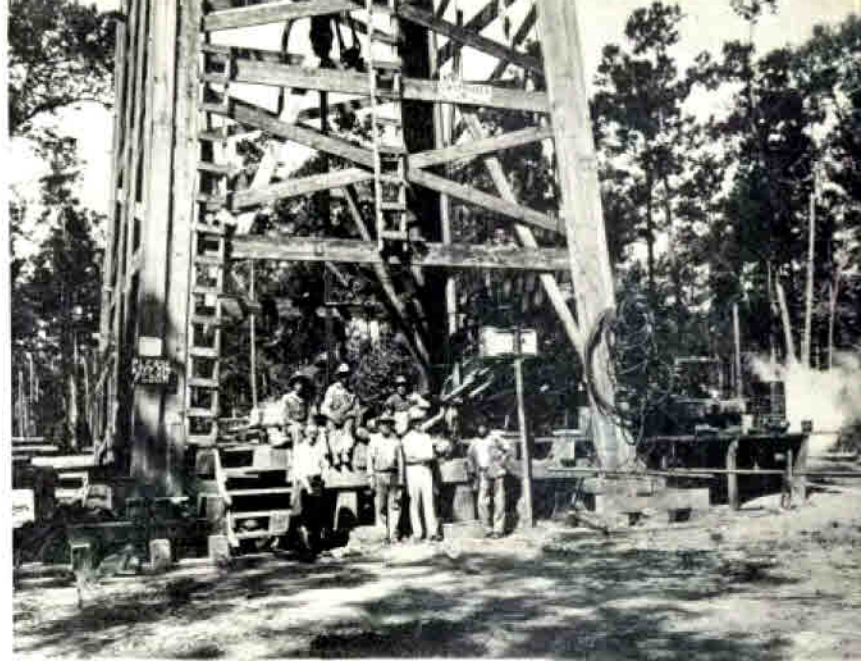
To this day, George W. Strake has remembered that lesson. Now he sits in the seat of the mighty, with so many successes behind him that he cannot count them all. But it is not the scorner's seat. George W. Strake knows what it is to fail and when it happens to another, his is the first voice of sympathy that is raised.

He was always a religious man. His early training, matured by the years he sent in the inspired atmosphere of St. Louis University, molded him into a man of strong beliefs and brought him closeness to God. No amount of worldly treasure could ever shake such faith.

Upon his return from Cuba, his faith was his strength as he set out to use the small means remaining at his disposal to gain back the ground he had lost, to move forward.

As always, he set out alone . . .

"I did not to my knowledge know intimately in 1927 one solitary person in the whole state of Texas except, of course, the members of my wife's family and a few of her friends."



At the end of a long, hard day of drilling.

Highways in those days were not what they are now. But George Strake got himself a car and started out through West Louisiana and East Texas.

"I had to study up on the way they did things in Texas. It was different from Mexico. It took me some time to get a

re-education in the business so I would know what I was doing.”

Mr. Strake had one thing in mind as he looked. He had learned that the Lagarto-Reynosa contact, oil and gas seeps, were good signs of oil—anywhere you found it. In Mexico, oil had been his luck and that was the same luck he was looking for now.

As he went about buying and selling leases, he knew that he was only marking time and keeping his money moving.

A man like George Strake will never be satisfied to grub a living, no matter how good a living it may be.

And he knew that actually he was searching for his luck and wherever he found it, he would drive his stake.

So along with his business deals, George Strake took many an excursion to explore lands that others had passed over, or hadn't thought enough about to examine very closely.

It was on one of those exploring trips that his footsteps led him along the side of a creek which had recently overflowed its banks but was now back to normal depth. As he walked along he noticed a crack in the creek bank where the edge had been washed away. He saw exposed there a shelf of rock that looked familiar. Using a geologist's pick, he chipped away some fragments and examined them.

“There was no doubt. They were Lagarto-Reynosa,” said Strake.

He was able to follow the exposure to a point where it disappeared into the ground. By a careful scrutiny of the surface in the surrounding area he was able pretty well to trace its

direction. The creek was south and east of Conroe, about three miles from the edge of the then-city limits.

It was directly across the town from the Kelly-Baker test which was about three miles west of Conroe.

Strake went home that night and thought things over. Could it actually be, he asked himself. It just didn't seem possible. After all, several major companies had taken a look at the area east of Conroe and had passed it by.

Pure Oil Co. geologists and those of other major companies had taken shots right in the center of the tract on which Strake found his out-croppings. Then they moved on and nothing ever came of it. According to the best scientific data and the methods in use at that time, all indications were that the Kelly-Baker field was on the right spot—west of town.

After a sleepless night, George Strake was up early the next morning and back looking at his “find.” This time he had his maps with him and he was able to pin-point his location.

He made up his mind right then. This had to be it.

Despite the fact that this was 1929 and the new depression had just set in, that the price of oil was tumbling and investment capital was fast being wiped away, Strake took what little money he had available and quietly started leasing up acreage. He didn't quit until he had control of 8,500 acres.

Then, with his leases in his hand, and his Lagarto-Reynosa samples in his pocket, George W. Strake came to Houston and offered the whole deal to the Humble Company and other majors—if they would drill a well.

“Drill?” they asked, and then they laughed.

"You're out of your mind. There's no oil over there. You're on the wrong side of Conroe," they told him and showed him the door . . .

A door that led out and away into a world staggering under a deepening depression that included George W. Strake who had nothing in this world except his wife, a small daughter, leases on 8,500 acres of Montgomery County land that nobody wanted, and a limited purse.

The Search For Oil

They first drilled for oil in Montgomery County in 1901.

They came searching after the Santa Fe Railroad drilled a water well and it turned up with oil in it.

This discovery caught the fancy of a Kansas farmer named Lowell Smith who came down to Montgomery County and sank a well not too far from where the Splendora field is located today.

He didn't strike oil, but Mr. Smith was not a man easily discouraged. He went back up north to his Kansas farm and harvested another crop during the summer. With the money from his harvest, he came down and sank another well. He did this year after year. But without success. His son came along with him, and while they were spudding into the ground there was an accident and young Smith was killed. The elder Smith was saddened, but, futile as it was, years later he was still searching for oil.

Then, in 1904, there was a brief flurry at Tamina, about 10 miles south of Conroe on the railroad track.

But nobody produced oil in paying quantities.

Around 1920, the first play in the area, later to be known as Kelly-Baker field, sent everybody's hopes soaring. But it turned out to be a dry hole.

Now, in the early thirties, it was still the Kelly-Baker area to the west that everybody in Conroe kept an eye on. They were sure that here would be uncovered Conroe's claim to fame, riches, and prosperity.

George W. Strake was a prophet without honor. He went from major company to major company, preaching the gospel of Strake's 8,500 acres. In cafes and on street corners he would talk to drillers and roughnecks, promoters, geologists, lease buyers, and other independents, who were watching Kelly-Baker.

"You're all drilling in the wrong place. The oil is over here," Strake would tell them.

But they laughed and came to talk of him as "that idiot, Strake."

Even as never before, he was a man alone. His counsel was sought by no one. People got so tired of hearing him tell about the big discoveries that were awaiting somebody to discover them that they began to run when they saw him coming.

It was at this time that Strake was offered 20,000 acres in East Texas. The show looked good over there and every indication was that a big field was in the making. Probably he could have gotten support in East Texas that was lacking in Conroe.

If he had accepted the lease on the acreage offered him, and drilled as he later did in Conroe, Mr. Strake would have discovered the center of the East Texas field at Kilgore—now the largest oil field in the United States.

But his heart was in Conroe and so was his money.

He stuck with it through 1930 and into 1931.

He event went so far as to offer to “checkerboard” with anybody who would drill (meaning to give up alternate 40-acre tracts to the driller), but nobody took him up on it. He offered to sell out, keeping only his override and a mineral interest. Nobody would offer him a price.

George W. Strake knew that 1931 was going to have to be the year of decision. Most of his leases would expire on August 31 of that year and if he didn’t spud in a well by that time, he lost the leases—or kept them only by paying renewal rentals which he didn’t have the money to meet.

As the spring was turning into summer, he went back to Houston one night, and as he and Mrs. Strake sat talking, he finally told her:

“Sue, we’ve got almost everything we own tied up in those leases. Nobody else is going to drill them, so I’ve got to.”

As she had been in Havana, Cuba, Mrs. Strake was equal to the occasion. “You do whatever you have to do. We’ll be all right,” she told him.

She also told him something else. The stork was coming again.

“Well, Dear,” said Mr. Strake, “I’m going ahead with it. You’ll either be the richest gal in Texas or I’ll be out looking for a job when it’s over.”

Raising money in Houston in 1931 was not only difficult, it was next to impossible.

“All the independent oil men in Houston joining hands

couldn’t raise two million dollars, and you couldn’t stand a banker on his head on a Main Street corner and shake \$1,000 out of him,” he remembers.

So he drew on a small nest egg he had kept hidden away. If that would not be enough he would borrow on his life insurance policies.

“I had to strain in every direction all at the same time. It wasn’t easy to throw away the last few dollars of what had once been my small fortune. But I was determined this had to be it and there was no turning back.”

It was an even bigger gamble than just the loss of his money.

Houston in 1931 was not the rich, powerful financial capital it is today. There were bank failures. Office buildings were untenanted, hotels were operating in the red, and there were bread lines in Houston. There were less than 10 oil fields within 50 miles of Houston, and most of them were small fields compared to present-day standards.

There was still another factor. Even if he hit, there was no assurance Strake could sell his oil. In 1931 East Texas had only been producing about a year yet the price was down to nine cents a barrel for crude oil. According to all indications, this was no year to drill a wildcat oil well.

Chances were 90 out of 100 for failure, even if he hit.

But George W. Strake was firm in his belief in God, and firm in his conviction that his was a God-given purpose.

With no help, with not so much as an encouraging word, George Strake set out to drill a well.

Getting Ready

"I'm no driller. I don't know the first thing about running drilling machinery, even today. But I knew what I had to have and I knew that nobody was going to get it for me."

First, he needed a drilling rig. Not just any rig would do, either. He needed one that was capable of going down 6,000 feet. It was nearing the end of July in 1931 when he ran across a man named Nick Carter, a former driller for the big independent of that day, Mills Bennett. Carter had a rig that would do the job and he was willing to rent it for \$500 a month.

But the rig was in the Barber's Hill field, which meant that it had to be hauled to Conroe.

"So I made a deal with Dewey and Martin, haulers, to bring that rig in for me at a price of \$1,000."

It was a big rig—it had three boilers each weighing no less than 30,000 pounds. While Mr. Dewey and Strake were debating one day about how to move it, they suddenly recalled that to get it to Conroe meant hauling it over the rickety iron bridge that then spanned the San Jacinto River. That bridge had a big sign on it reading "Limit 5,000 Pounds."

Mr. Strake had too much tied up already in this thing to risk having a boiler fall through that bridge. Not only would he be in trouble for violating the law, but he could envision all kinds of law-suits and it wouldn't take too much of that to wipe him out completely.

He and Mr. Dewey got into Mr. Strake's car and rode around the different roads, trying to figure out another way to get the rig into the Conroe field.

"We figured we might go by Humble. But I found out I'd have to build about 500 culverts and the roads weren't too good anyway. I just plain couldn't see that. It would take more money than I had and take too much time," said Mr. Strake.

They were sitting in a cafe in Conroe when Mr. Dewey looked Strake in the eye and said, "Mr. Strake, let's just go out and take a look at that bridge over the San Jacinto."

So they got in Strake's car and drove out until they came to the bridge. They got out and scrambled down the bank to the bottom underneath the bridge.

The cars coming over the old bridge made a terrible noise. It was almost enough to make both men run every time they heard one. "We'll just stay here until some cotton trucks pass. I know they weigh more than 5,000 pounds. Some of them might even weigh 30,000 pounds loaded. If this bridge will take them, then I know it will take those boilers," Dewey told Strake.

So they sat there on the river bank, smoking and talking, listening to the cars rumble past on the bridge. Finally, they saw a cotton truck coming, really loaded down. They jumped up and ran under the bridge.

Here it came. It hit the bridge going about 40 miles an hour. The old contraption shook and shuddered, and the noise was terrifying enough to make a man want to pray, but the bridge held. The truck went on over and down the road.

Both Mr. Dewey and Mr. Strake were shaken, but satisfied.

"We'll bring it in over this bridge," Mr. Dewey said.

Mr. Strake was apprehensive and asked him what about the law.

"Tell you what, we'll do it late at night, when the highway police aren't patrolling," Mr. Dewey said. Because he couldn't think of any other way, Mr. Strake agreed.

Mr. Dewey decided to bring in the three boilers to be followed by all the rest of the rig. That meant that Strake had to start thinking about a crew.

But he knew little or nothing about picking up a crew. This was too important an item for him to make a mistake, and some of the characters who had been out of work in Houston didn't look like exactly choice specimen. To help him out in this important decision, Strake turned to the one friend he knew he had in the Conroe area.

Britt Freeman.

"I had first met Britt Freeman when I started scouting the Conroe area, back in 1929. He had a grazing lease and I had an oil lease on the same land. He owned some mules and some wagons, and a truck, I believe, and he had been cutting timber under contract to the South Texas Development Co. The depression had hit him a hard lick, and like all the rest of us, he was slowly starving to death.

"I asked Britt if he could help me find a crew and he suggested I go see some fellows over in Humble. I drove over there and got to talking with a nice bunch of fellows . . . Jimmie Graham and others, who were later to be part of my drilling crew. But I couldn't find a driller. All of them suggested that if I could find Harvey Lee, I'd have the right man.

"All right," I told them, "where is Harvey Lee?"

"One of them spoke up, 'He's over in East Texas.'

"So I set out for East Texas to look for him."

"By reputation, I learned that Harvey Lee was a first class driller and had been working in the Gulf Coast and now drilling in East Texas. But when East Texas collapsed, he was out of a drilling job. With the depression and all, he was forced to take the first job he could find—working over old wells.

"You talk about looking for a needle in a haystack," Mr. Strake recalls.

"I got in my car and drove over into East Texas. There was only one way to go looking. That was to drive a while, stop a while, and ask people if they knew Harvey Lee."

Strake covered the entire South portion of the great East Texas oil field looking for Harvey Lee. He hunted several days for him. Occasionally, he would run across somebody who knew him, but not where he was.

Finally, at the end of a long, hot and fruitless day, he was ready to give up. He turned his car around to head for home.

But as he drove along toward Houston, his attention was attracted by a crew working off to one side of the road. He decided to stop and try one more time.

He got out of his car and asked one of the men, "Do you know Harvey Lee?"

"Sure do," the man answered.

"Know where I can find him?" asked Mr. Strake.

"Right up there in that cabin on top of the hill," the man answered.

Mr. Strake drove up to the top of the hill. There was an unpainted frame cabin and a woman out in the yard.

"Pardon me, ma'am, but do you know Harvey Lee?" Mr. Strake asked.

The woman looked up from her work, looked Mr. Strake up and down and turned her head.

"Harvey," she called, "Oh Harvey. Come out here." She turned out to be Harvey Lee's wife.

After all his trouble locating Lee, Strake decided to have some fun with him before telling him the true purpose of his visit.

Harvey Lee came wandering out and peered into the sun which was at Strake's back.

"Are you Harvey Lee?" asked Strake.

"Sure am," the man answered.

"Well, I'm the sheriff from Conroe and I've come to take you in," Strake told him, assuming a grave expression.

There never was a more startled man than Harvey Lee. He actually looked so frightened that Strake didn't try to carry his joke any further.

"I'm not the sheriff," he finally said, and the man's shoulders straightened as if a weight had been removed from them.

"My name is George Strake and I'm going to drill a wildcat well close to Conroe, near your home in Humble. I've got a pretty good crew all rounded up and they all tell me you're the

best driller I could hire for the job. Do you want to come to work for me?"

Harvey Lee paused just long enough to exchange a glance with his wife.

"I sure do," he answered.

After talking a while they settled on a salary of \$350 a month. It seemed like a dream come true for Lee, who had been getting in only about three days a week on hourly wages reworking wells.

Lee explained why he and his wife had been so shocked when Mr. Strake said he was the sheriff.

"That's the second bad scare we had today. You see, not long before you drove up, we discovered a rattler under the baby's crib and thinking about what might have happened had us all unnerved."

They shook hands on the deal. Mr. Strake got in his car and headed back for Houston. He had a rig, a crew, and a driller, and a source of fuel. All he needed was to get his three boilers over the San Jacinto River without mishap and he was in business.

Reflection

Let's stop and take a look at George W. Strake the next day as he strode about inspecting the equipment that had been unloaded at his drilling site by Dewey-Martin trucks. Let's look him over from his Stetson perched on top of his head to his leather boots that are laced tightly on his legs, almost to his knees.



The first Strake well . . . and a big gamble pays off in oil.

He's a wiry man, alert, with sparkling eyes, combining the finely drawn qualities of the dreamer with the nervous energy of a man of action.

George Strake is 37 years old. He has made one fortune of \$250,000. That was in the days before big income tax, when a

dollar bought a dollar's worth, truly a sizable fortune. He had lost that fortune in a bad business venture, barely holding together enough to keep him moving about the oil fields. It is a depression year—the worst in the history of America.

In Washington, the veterans are marching on the capitol demanding a bonus. There are bankruptcies and suicides on Wall Street. In Houston, there are breadlines. People are hungry, frightened, hopeless.

Over in nearby East Texas, oil is selling for nine cents a barrel. Confusion and chaos reign. The oil allowable has been set so low that well-owners have attached left-handed valves to their wells. When the valves are turned off, they're actually turned on. Oil is being bootlegged in wholesale quantities from every field in the area.

Marital law has been declared in East Texas and the National Guard has been sent in to preserve law and order.

These are terrible times—as terrible as the country has ever known.

And in these times, when even the bravest men shudder before the dread of the future, George W. Strake—who does not really feel like a brave man at all—has decided to drill a rank wildcat.

He had chosen a location where he alone has confidence. He has gone to every major oil company operating in this territory and each has called it folly to drill east of Conroe. Nobody believes in his idea except one man—himself.

Only a man with true faith in God, with the confidence in his own ultimate destiny that such faith brings, would have drilled that oil well when he did, where he did, tying up his every last hope for the future in such a wildcat gamble.

It is August 12, 1931.

It is summertime and it is hot. There is at times a prevailing southeast breeze, but the thick forest cuts most of it off. It has been a wet summer and insects abound. There are flies in the daytime and mosquitoes at night.

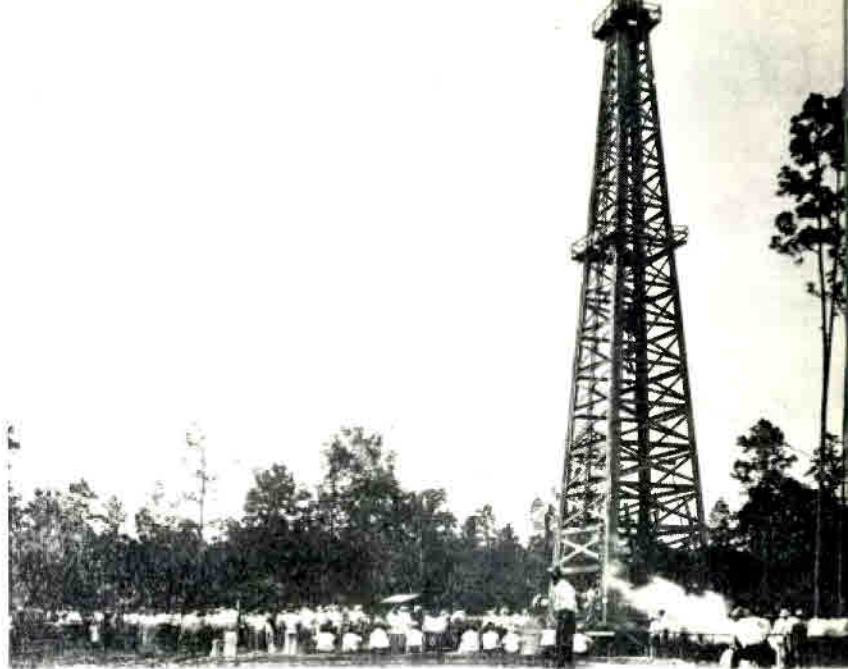
There is mud and the humid heat that steams up out of the ground like a steam bath, held to the ground by the spreading limbs of the trees overhead.

And there is George W. Strake, whose immediate object is to drill an oil well.

In the rough language of the oil fields, he is George Strake, "the fool."

Fool that they may have thought him, there stands George Strake planning a venture that is destined to rock the world and kill the depression in South Texas and bring confidence back to oil men who had all but given up.

Houston, as a result, would soon replace Tulsa, Oklahoma, as the oil capitol of the world and Conroe would take its place in the ranks of progressive and prosperous towns of the great Southwest. Timber lands within five miles of the city limits of Conroe, then selling for five dollars per acre—timber, minerals and all—would soon skyrocket to staggering prices.



Thousands turned out to see the Strake No. 2 come in on June 5, 1932.

The boom was in the making.

Sleepy, unconcerned Conroe would soon find its name associated with history and Houston would crowd out all cities south of the Mason-Dixon line to become in the near future the largest metropolis of the entire south.

Suspense

The wooden derrick is now complete, pointing skyward, awaiting its rig. Strake and Dewey have completed their plans and are ready to start hauling the three heavy, clumsy boilers across the challenging rickety bridge spanning the San Jacinto.

Dewey starts the first one at midnight of August 12, 1931.

At his home in Houston, Strake is suffering nightmares in which the bridge collapses in a heap of twisted metal and his boiler drops to the bottom of the river.

Unable to stand the suspense, Strake jumped in his car and drove toward Conroe. Picking up one of his crew, he drove to a spot two miles south of the river and parked. His plan was to watch for the first truck, intercept the driver, and again urge him to use utmost caution in crossing the bridge.

For what seemed like interminable hours the two vanguards held out against the drowsy damp air of the river bottoms, the pangs of hunger, and the lure of sleep. When the truck hadn't pulled into sight at 3 a.m., Strake and his companion decided to hurry into Conroe to get some food and "a warm-up."

They pulled in at a little all-night cafe two blocks from the courthouse where they were the only customers. "Never," remembers Strake, "did bacon and eggs and coffee taste so good."

Strake kept an eye on the street, watching an occasional car pass, happy every time one came from the south. "Then I'd know the bridge was still up, anyway," he said.

With a new lease on life, the two men jumped into the car

ready to return to their vigil at the bridge. But before he could turn the car around, Strake's heart gave a happy beat for joy at the sight of a truck and boiler passing him not three feet away, headed north.

Strake was soon on his tail and when the truck stopped about a block from the courthouse he caught up.

Driving alongside, Strake asked the driver, "Where are you taking the boiler?"

The driver answered, "To the Strike well."

"Don't you mean to the Strake well?" asked Strake.

"I guess so," answered the driver.

"Well, then it's mine. Follow me and I'll lead you into the woods to the location."

The driver replied that he wasn't ready to go any further.

"I haven't slept for two nights and this is as far as I go. Wake me at eight o'clock and I'll be ready to roll again," he said, and pulling a soiled jacket up around his neck he curled up in the cab and went to sleep.

Why not, thought Strake, was not all Conroe asleep too? After all, only he and his crewman, and the hospitable little cafe owner had to stay awake. Back to the cafe they went, to sip coffee and spend four more hours waiting to lead the truck down into the woods, where the early morning silence would be broken only by the call of the hoot-owl, an ambitious woodpecker, or a frightened deer scampering away into the gloom.

When they got back to the truck at eight o'clock, Strake for the first time met Mr. Martin, Dewey's partner. With Martin and then the truck following behind, Strake led the way to his now-famous location.

An hour later, 9 a.m. on the morning of August 13, 1931 ("13" is no jinx for Strake) he and the other three men began taking the first boiler off the truck with chain blocks anchored to pine trees. Strake used a pocket compass to get the boiler set exactly in place.

"I wanted the boilers set so that we could take every advantage of the prevailing southeast breeze as draft for our boiler fire boxes, because we needed all there was to get the most out of the wood we would use as fuel to produce steam," Strake said.

Never before in the history of oil had a deep test been drilled with wood. Would Strake be the first?

"Some more of Strake's folly," was the comment of the hangers-on who kept up with his daily progress by word of mouth.

"I had to use wood and defy all the theories of the neo-petroleum engineers of that day in order to conserve every possible dollar to see the well down," Strake countered, telling about his wood burning boilers.

In anticipation of the need for wood, Strake purchased particularly printed lease forms on which he procured his oil and gas leases, which permitted him to use wood from the land. He interpreted wood to also mean growing trees and exercised his rights under the lease by having Britt Freeman chop down trees for boiler-fuel. Crude oil was cheap enough and almost

without a market, but fuel oil for boilers was many miles from Conroe with truck hauling charges completely beyond Strake's budget.

"I made a deal with my old friend, Britt Freeman, and it was probably as much a God-send for him as it was for me in those days of depression. He was to cut down pine trees on the land he knew so well, saw them up into four-foot lengths, split four ways, and haul the cherished 'four-foot gas' to the boiler side at \$5 per cord."

Britt Freeman went to work handily, making use of his teams of mules and his wagons, but delay threatened the well from another quarter.

"Through either inexperience or bad luck, the contractor I had hired to drill a water well kept running into delays and took two weeks to find water," Strake said.

This, said Strake, was the deepest blow and almost brought him to the brink of despair.

August 31, 1931, was the deadline, to either start a well on the South Texas Development Co. lease or pay renewal rentals to extend his lease.

"It was a nightmare. How cruel, I thought, could Lady Luck be to me. My job was done and I was ready to go, but there I was a victim of the water well contractor's troubles, all beyond my control. There would be no hope of getting an extension of time because the Texas representative of the landowners, who was in Albany, N. Y., was very unfriendly. I knew I couldn't take that kind of a chance," said Strake.

He went into a huddle with his trusted friend, Harvey Lee, and confided in him that for safety reasons, they must be making hole no later than August 31. Either that . . . or face disaster.

"Faithfully and compassionately Harvey suggested making hole by hand, and explained how we could do it. Since there was no alternative, we had to try it."

And it worked!

With three sets of chain tongs, eight men, including Strake himself, started a slow circuit of the drilling floor, pulling the rotary around and around and around—finally spudding in the discovery well-to-be in a history breaking manner with pure human strength.

In the meantime, Harvey Lee suggested that Britt Freeman be taken off his wood job, and rig up a water tank on his old Ford truck to haul water to fill up one of the boilers. This was done and all hands took on the job of hand-pumping water from a nearby creek up into the tank, then hauling the same up to the boiler. There, all the gang took turns again, pumping the water out of the truck into the boiler. When boiler number one was full, it was fired up with the eternally famous and beloved "4-foot gas." Strake and his faithful crew glued their eyes to the gauge and when 300 pounds of pressure was hit, a cheer from the heart went up and there was a round of handshaking. With mutual congratulations and good luck, they raced to the derrick floor where Harvey Lee for the first time opened up the engines, sending the rotary table spinning, plunging down into the 50-foot man-made hole to drive the bit closer and closer to a test that would uncover new wealth never before disturbed by the hand of man, which would affect the lives of untold millions.

"I hope," said Strake, "that my profound and sincere prayer said at that moment, one of the happiest in my entire lifetime, was received by God in complete satisfaction for my utterance of Thanksgiving for having saved me from failure. I have always had a terrific filial love and faith in a personal and living God—this was additional proof of His paternal interest in a venture that was dedicated to Him in 1929 exclusively for His honor and glory.

"How could human consolation and help overcome these most disheartening obstacles in so dark an hour as then confronted me? I often wonder what real happiness and satisfaction do men get out of life when they do not give credit to God for their successes in life. What fools they are, how selfish must be their hearts."

With the belching of smoke, rising heavenward like a prayer, and Harvey Lee churning the drill stem slowing at first, then faster and faster, and again with loud and happy cheers, the famous G. W. Strake No. 1, South Texas Development Co. discovery well, was now a reality.

Drilling The Well

Now with a hole being made, a good water well, acres of cord wood piled high, all worries except striking oil seemed to be over. But alas for George W. Strake, that was not to be.

As the smoke from Strake's "triple fireplace" soared skyward, people throughout the area looked at the new dark cloud that had appeared in the sky and marvelled. The word got around quickly. To some it came as a surprise.

"In these times, with the oil industry on the brink of disaster and the depression getting worse every day, a man just doesn't drill a wildcat where there ain't no oil," the wiseacres would tell themselves.

They still called Strake a "nut."

But the wiser heads among them began to wonder. Sure, you just didn't do what Strake was doing, but there he was, doing it.

First one, then the other, and then in groups, the promoters and lease speculators, and the scouts began to drop by to see what the Strake well was doing.

At first Strake had a second driller and a 24-hour drilling schedule.

But on September 13, he completed his "big hole" and after that drilled only during the day.

"I had the fullest confidence in Harvey Lee. He knew his business and he was now my trusted friend. I couldn't afford to take the chance of going through an oil sand and not knowing it. I knew that couldn't happen to Harvey Lee," explained Strake.

So every evening, as it neared quitting time, the crew would pull all the pipe out of the hole, break it down into joints of three, and stack it up in the derrick. Next day, they'd have to lower it into the hole again before they actually started another day's operations.

The rains had quit and a hot, dry spell had set in. This brought on a new problem.

To keep his firewood blazing along, Britt Freeman each day gathered several wagon loads of pine knots that would go into the boiler fireboxes each time a new supply of wood went in.

With the terrific draw of the boiler stacks, the pine bark would pull loose from the wood and go flashing out the chimney, raging fountains of fire, which the wind would carry into the treetops or the dry grass of small clearings.

One day one of the hands looked up from the drill stem to the trees beyond the location and yelled "Fire!"

The blazing bark had set the woods on fire.

Harvey Lee shut down the engine and all hands grabbed up sacks and shovels. Quickly wetting the sacks in the earthen tank, they turned firefighters. The flames were extinguished before they could endanger the rig.

But it wasn't long before it happened again. Sometimes it happened two or three times a day. Each time meant an interruption in drilling.

The State forester who sat in the turret of the old courthouse and scanned the countryside for forest fires soon spotted the belching flames from Strake's boilers as fire hazards. One day, the forester rode out to the location, sat in his car a minute, then got out and strolled over to Harvey Lee.

"Close 'er down," he ordered.

Strake, who had been standing off to one side, heard the rotary screech to a halt. He hurried over to the drilling platform.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You've got a fire hazard," answered the forester.

So they talked the matter over. There was only one way Strake could continue to operate his wood-burning boilers.

"Put spark arrestors over 'em," said the forester.

So the fires were allowed to die out and the crew hastily rigged up spark arrestors to fit over the stacks. The arrestors were of mesh wire and fit over the stacks like a bakers cap.

Next day the boilers were fired up again. The arrestors worked.

"Fine and dandy," said the forester, and got into his car and drove off.

It was fine and dandy for a while. The arrestors caught the bark and held it there. But when the bark had accumulated, it cut off the draft up the stacks. The fires began going out.

George Strake was beside himself. Life was just one desperate situation after another and at every turn he seemed to be stymied.

The boiler problem was most serious. His money, not too much to start with, was at a low ebb. He couldn't afford any delay.

He stood beside the boilers late that afternoon, watching as a few last thin threads of smoke escaped skyward. He was feeling disconsolate and defeated.

His fireman stood at his side.

"Mr. Strake," he said, "I can fix those boilers for you."

"You can?" Mr. Strake said, very much interested.

"Yes, sir, if you'll just turn your back a minute."

Strake thought a minute, then turned and faced away from the boilers.

The fireman stepped into a rough cabin that had been built as office and sleeping quarters and came back with a shotgun he kept there for the purpose, he often said, of "chasing away the deer if they get too close to the fire."

Taking a careful bead, he fired three shots—one at each of the spark arrestors.

Mr. Strake turned around. Smoke—beautiful, wonderful black smoke was again darkening the sky. The draft exploded flames against a fresh load of pineknots and the fires crackled. The spark arrestors were nothing but tattered fragments. The heavy buck-shot did the trick.

He watched the smoke a minute while he took big, deep breaths.

"Good shooting," he told the fireman.

After that it was a constant sweat because Strake knew that if the forester returned and saw those shredded arrestors, he would be closed down and in court within the hour. But it was another one of those things—like the rickety bridge over the San Jacinto that held. The forester never returned.

In the history of the oil business in this country, there prob-

ably never was another oil well drilled as was the George W. Strake No. 1—South Texas Development Co.

Every morning, go back in the hole. Every evening, come out of the hole. Wood-burning boilers. The daily stops to fight fires.

Yet it kept going down and down and down.

As each day's operations progressed, new rumors kept pace.

"Strake's not in this alone. He must have some big company staking him, you can bet on that," was one rumor.

"He's in with some crooked scout who spotted this location for a big company then turned in a false report," was another.

"He's on to something. A man wouldn't keep on if he didn't know something," some people were saying.

But they were in the minority.

Strake's just a d--- fool who is losing his pants and doesn't know it," was still the popular consensus.

Still a few managed to make a pass by his location every so often. Promoters and scouts alike shook their heads as they observed his operation, but they couldn't ignore the fact that he kept on going down.

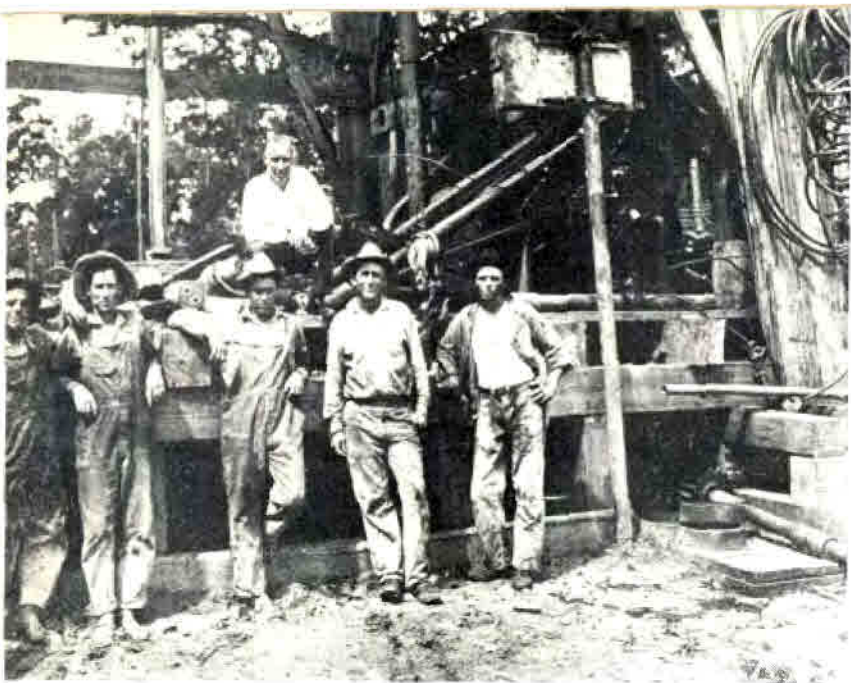
On October 13 he cored a shale which turned out to be the Textularia-Hockleyensis formation at 4,125 feet, which mingled with sand had a slight show of oil and gas. Strake decided to

make a drill-stem test and in order that it might be private he roped off the entire location to keep out strangers. Just before daylight the drill stem test was made which resulted in a small amount of gas and a rainbow showing of oil on the mud in the drill stem. This, as far as a producer was concerned, was a disappointment because it was predominately salt water. However, this was a very encouraging sign as to structure because the Hockleyensis which contained a marine formation commonly called the "bug" was unusually high, which convinced Strake that he had in all probability a big closure and perhaps a big oil field.

At the outset Strake made an arrangement with the Humble Company, Texas Company and Gulf Company to deliver to them individually samples of all cuttings and cores from the well, and he delivered each one of the sacks of samples to the three companies in Houston personally. His arrangement was that in consideration for his giving these three companies this very valuable geological information, that they in turn were individually obligated to deliver to Strake within 48 hours a typewritten paleontological report based on the cuttings and cores delivered to them previously. This arrangement was faithfully complied with by the three companies.

An incident occurred, however, which placed Strake for a considerable length of time in a peculiar light in the eyes of these three companies. After coring the Hockleyensis, Strake delivered the same to each of the companies' paleontologist, and to use Strake's words:

"As I delivered each one of these sacks to the companies I made a casual remark that I thought the 'bug' was in the



W. J. Pfiffner, Jr., with some of the crew during a lull in drilling the Strake No. 2.

bag, and sure enough under the microscope they did find the Hockleyensis 'bug.' With that information the three companies were definitely confused as to whether that core actually came out of my well and if so, was the depth correct. If those two things were true, then they estimated that I had a terrific structure.

"However, they secretly whispered between themselves that it was possible that I was either a cunning promoter or maybe a very good liar."

Strake was absolutely innocent of the whispering campaign at the time, of course, and did not learn of these thoughts of doubt about him until a long time after he brought in the well.

After they tested salt water at that particular point rumors went abroad that Strake had a salt water well.

"I remember one particular incident when Dick Hooper, who was at that time a lease broker operating principally in Washington County, as I was told, wired his brother-in-law, and my very good friend of beloved memory, the late K. G. Shaeffer, to lay off the Strake well—that it was a salt water well. Ironically, this particular core showing the Hockleyensis high even with the salt water was to be the forerunner of a large fortune that was to be made by Dick Hooper and his entire family affecting the lands owned by them in the middle of the Conroe oil field."

During the time Strake was making the drill stem test on the early morning in October, two strangers came upon the scene and ignored the barrier set up by Strake. One was named Goodrich and the other was Pete Frost. They had evidently heard of the drill stem test contemplated by Strake and in spite of the early morning, managed to be on Strake's location at the psychological time. Strake endeavored to have them leave his lease, but was unsuccessful primarily because his attention was required on the derrick floor during the process of making his very important drill stem test.

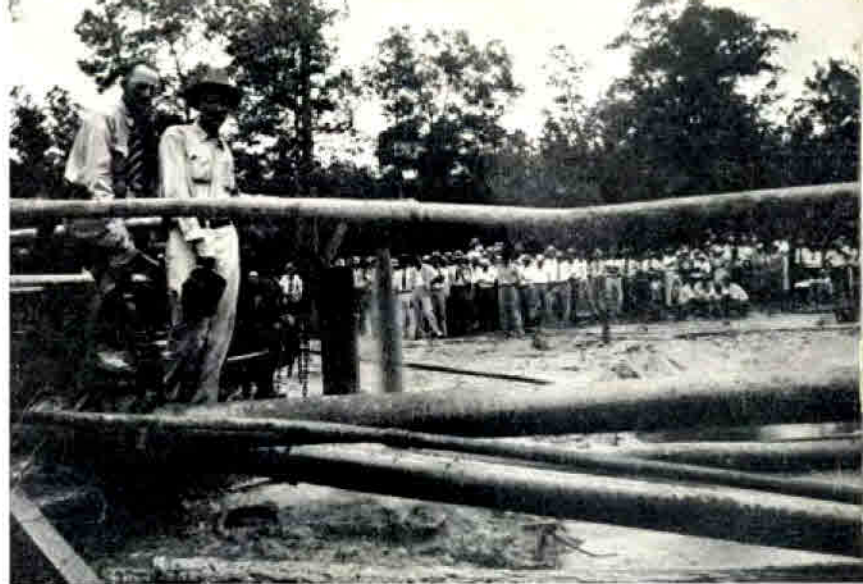
On the strength of seeing gas produced at that shallow depth, in spite of the salt water that was also encountered, these two experienced oil men, one a former geologist of the Humble Oil Company, knew that was a strong indication of an oil well in the immediate vicinity. On the strength of what they saw, they purchased leases in the immediate vicinity which was the basis of their present large fortunes.

After the drill stem test and the paleontological examination, the three major oil companies which were furnished cuttings and core samples became alarmed.

If Strake had an oil field in the making they themselves had no acreage within several miles of the well, and one of the aggressive scouts of the Humble Oil Company, Earl Short, who was an outstanding scout in those days, was determined to get true information regardless.

He came upon the lease and demanded of Strake that he be allowed to check the depth of the well and also to be permitted to see the next core taken and, furthermore, to be permitted to look through the core barrel to see sunlight through it before same was run into the hole to cut another core. The suspicion was that Strake might have "salted" his previous cores, a not too uncommon trick in the oil business. Strake demanded that Earl Short leave the premises. He felt Short had no right to demand anything as his company, the Humble, made no contribution to his well whatsoever, which therefore gave them no privilege to go on the derrick floor.

As they had been furnished samples and depths daily, their companies should know as much about the well, the depth



How the crowds turned out for this eventful day . . . the Strake No. 2 comes in!

and the formations encountered, as Strake and his crewmen personally knew.

Upon Short's insistence, Strake warned him that if he did not leave the premises that maybe a shotgun in the shack might strongly induce him to do so.

Not to be outdone, this dean of all scouts climbed a distant tree and with powerful field glasses counted the drill stem out

of the hole, and through his experience almost accurately estimated the entire depth of the hole. Knowing the depth, but not knowing where this particular exciting formation was encountered by Strake and his crew, left Short and his company still in a state of confusion.

The next day Mr. Short came onto the lease again in a most apologetic manner, expressing regret for his actions of yesterday and asked if he could verify all the information as Strake claimed, so that he could take back that information to make a good record for himself with his fine company.

After a change of attitude, Strake permitted Short to go on the derrick floor and look through the core barrel which was being readied to take another core. Short stayed on the derrick floor for many hours to watch the complete cycle of going into the hole and coming out again with a new core, knowing then that the depth and the cutting of the Hockleyensis formation was the truth in every way.

From that moment on, the company nervously watched Strake's well, wondering whether or not it would result in an oil field.

At the time Martin and Dewey delivered the rig to the Strake location at a cost of \$1,000, Mr. Dewey personally told Strake that in all the years he had been delivering rigs to wildcat locations he had always taken part of his hauling fee in acreage, hoping that some day he might hit it rich.

Mr. Dewey told Strake that he would like to do so in his case too for fear that this might be the one to hit. Strake was

in need of funds but did not plan to sell off small tracts. However in the case of Mr. Dewey and his friendship, he assigned to Dewey two 25-acre tracts at \$10 per acre and paid the balance to Mr. Dewey of \$500 in cash. One of these 25-acre tracts Martin and Dewey sold to the Alpha Petroleum Co., which was the beginning of that company's fortune.

That assignment to Mr. Dewey suggested to Britt Freeman that he too would like to have a few acres in the Strake block, so he asked Strake if he could buy 20 acres and pay for it out of wood delivered to the boilers. This Strake did by assigning him 20 acres at a value of \$10 per acre.

After Strake had spudded in his well the South Texas Development Company sold certain timber rights on the land to the Navasota Cooperage Company of Navasota, Texas.

One of their cruisers, a Mr. Bice, a personal friend of Britt Freeman, asked Freeman to request Strake to also sell him 10 acres at \$10 per acre and because of his friendship with Freeman, Strake assigned 10 acres to Bice. One more transaction was to be made on a small scale. Strake's former secretary, when he was with the Mexican Gulf Oil Company, and at that time, like Strake, living in Houston, asked if he could buy 5 acres for \$50—his life savings.

Because of old friendship Strake did so, making a total of 85 acres sold for the "staggering" sum of \$850. Mr. Dewey apparently fared very well and as Strake said, "I am awfully happy to say that my good friend, Britt Freeman, made one of the finest buys perhaps of his entire lifetime." How the other two fared no one knows.

Troubles were again casting their shadows in Strake's path. The Navasota Cooperage Company serviced notice on Strake at a time when the well was down approximately 4,000 feet, to stop cutting down pine trees which they had recently purchased as standing timber. Strake produced his lease showing that he had the right to the trees growing on the land for the purpose of drilling his wildcat well. The Navasota Cooperage Company, whose timber deed was junior to Strake's oil leases, claimed that that simply meant dead wood fallen to the ground.

Strake countered by telling the timber firm that if they got an injunction out to shut down the well, he would hold them liable for the limit of his losses.

Evidently the Navasota Cooperage Company realized Strake's determination and also his rights under the lease, as they made no further threats in connection with Strake's cutting down the timber.

"It looked mighty gloomy in the face of the threat and I wondered whether I could overcome that obstacle like I had been fortunate in the past to overcome similar serious ones," said Strake.

Drilling continued with all of its trials and tribulations—fighting of fires in the woods, because of the boilers; the constant failure to consistently hold steam up with wood, the shutting down of the rig until steam could build up to continue drilling for a few more hours—but still the drill steam kept going down and down until on November 13, again Strake's lucky number,

the top of the present producing formation in Conroe was cored. This was perhaps one of the most thrilling moments in any young man's lifetime. Core after core of this rich sand was taken until the last bit of drill stem on the rack was used up at a total depth of 4,991 feet.

At that time one of Mr. Strake's lawyers suggested that Strake employ two ex-drillers, D. B. McDaniel and Albert Plummer, formerly employed by major companies, who were partners at the time in small ventures.

Because of their actual experience in drilling oil wells, they could take over the field operations, and as they desired to purchase some interest in Strake's venture, the association seemed ideal.

Although Strake did not know the two men in question, he liked the idea and sold them a 10% stock interest in his newly formed company known as Strake Oil Corporation of Texas, to which company he transferred his entire South Texas Development Company lease comprising more or less of 4,300 acres.

In addition to the stock interest in the company, Strake also assigned to Plummer and McDaniel jointly, 40 acres northeast of the well and 60 acres southwest of the well, all of which was the beginning of later fortunes for both.

Plummer and McDaniel were to have the right to verify the situation existing in the well. Like Earl Short, they insisted on actually seeing the core barrel empty before it was started in

the hole. In addition, they personally wanted to cut a core when the core head reached bottom.

Strake became indignant and told them that what he said was a fact and if they doubted it they would have to pay him \$5,000 to make their verifications. If the facts were not as Strake stated, then, naturally, there wouldn't be any deal anyway.

As payment for the stock and the two small tracts, they were to pay the entire cost of completing Strake's well, such as running of casing, screen, Christmas tree, flow lines, tanks and all other equipment necessary for the proper completion of an oil well.

"My name is Strake and my car is bogged down in the woods. I wonder if you would drive me to Conroe."

As neither one of these gentlemen had ever had experience, they said, with pressures comparable to this well they suggested that the drill stem be left in the hole to be used as tubing and that they in turn would replace Strake's drill stem with new drill stem. This they did not do until nearly five months later in spite of Strake's threatened litigation.

The plan of association and their actual taking over of field operations proved unsatisfactory at the outset and as a result never did materialize. The stock and the acreage assigned to them by Strake was the basis of their present large fortunes.

Because Strake's drill stem was, therefore, tied up in the discovery well the second well contemplated by Strake was delayed more than five months. This well now is known as

G. W. Strake No. 2—South Texas Development Company.

The discovery well came in on December 31, 1931, producing a great quantity of gas and several hundred barrels of 59 gravity oil at 4,991 feet. Subsequently, the well was deepened 30 more feet and recompleted in the lower sand containing 36 gravity green oil which is now being produced over the entire field. The discovery well, Strake No. 1, has been producing its allowable during the past 25 years and is still going strong.

Like so many millions throughout the nation who were out of work due to the depression, Strake's brother-in-law, William J. Pfiffner, who resided in Conroe, found in St. Louis that opportunities were limited.

He came down to Conroe to assist Strake who appointed him Drilling and Field Superintendent. In that capacity he became a close witness to the trials, disappointments and tribulations experienced in the early days of developing the Conroe field. Pfiffner remained with Strake for several years, then resigned to enter private business using the handsome nest egg he realized from the sale of Strake Oil Corporation stock assigned him as a participation interest.

"Bill learned the hard way in Conroe," Strake later said of this association, "and his quick grasp of our situation made him a valuable associate at all times."

On December 12, the ground was rumbling and shaking and it was ready. But mechanical difficulties delayed the finishing of the well.

Pelting rain fell most of the day of December 12, 1931. The crew—with Strake looking on—worked feverishly through the night to make repairs on the equipment. Finally, about 3 a.m., tired and worried, Strake started out for Conroe to get something to eat. But about two miles away his car skidded and slipped off the plank road into the mud, hopelessly bogged down.

The highway was about two miles away. Then it was another three miles to Conroe.

Rather than go back to the well, he walked to the highway and turned toward Conroe, prepared to walk all the way, when he saw a light in a house about 75 feet from the road. With forbidding dogs, he dared not enter the yard.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled, "Hello, hello."

But a train coming by drowned out his voice and he had to wait until the train had passed.

Then he tried again.

"Hello, hello," he yelled. He repeated it several times. The dogs barked a vicious challenge in return.

Finally a man came to the door and opened it, looking out.

The man stood there a moment, then stepped back into the house and slammed the door. Mr. Strake waited a few moments but nothing happened—except the barking of the dogs.

"Hello, hello," he yelled again, and again. He repeated it several times before the door was opened.

"My name is Strake and I'm the fellow who is drilling the oil well. Could you take me to Conroe?"

Again, without a word, the man stepped back into the house and slammed the door.

Mr. Strake was feeling pretty low. Tired as he was, hungry and wet, with Conroe still three miles away was just too large an obstacle for him to overcome.

Then he saw a car approaching. He stepped into the beam of its headlights and waved his hat to flag it down.

The car slowed down and pulled to a halt. Mr. Strake walked up to the driver's side and was about to speak when a voice said, "Hello, Mr. Strake, what in the world are you doing out here?"

It was a man named H. H. Mahaffey, then the county tax collector.

He was on his way to take a friend home from Conroe.

They gladly offered Mr. Strake a ride—only the friend had to be taken home first.

While they bounced through the darkness, the friend asked Mr. Strake:

"How about getting permission to take my mules and drag people out of the mud tomorrow?"

"Sure," said Mr. Strake, "but you can't charge over \$1 a car."

He would have dealt less blandly had he known how extensive an operation this would turn out to be.



The George W. Strake No. 2, Southwest Development Co., proved the Conroe field on June 5, 1932. It was a cleaner location than the first Strake well.

Mr. Mahaffey's friend made over \$300 from his mud concession the next day.

Daylight found Mr. Strake, fortified and with a fresh change of clothing, on his way back to the well.

Success

It was Sunday, December 13, 1931.

A day of history for Conroe.

A day that was to be the beginning of many of the vast fortunes, so well known throughout the great southwest today, made directly or indirectly because of the Conroe Discovery.

A day never to be forgotten by those who saw it and took part in it.

From the earliest hours of daylight, automobiles were moving slowly up the plank road to the location of the George W. Strake No. 1 South Texas Development Company location.

Men on horseback came riding up through the woods to sit on the edge of the activity, looking down on the other people, watching the drilling crews.

Most of the day the rain continued to fall. But all day long the people waited, sensing that this was history in the making.

Strake himself had gone back into Conroe a second time after getting his car removed from the bog. His steps led him

this time to the little mission Catholic church where Mass was being said. Quietly he made his way to a bench near the rear and on the side. He was in the midst of his devotions when his attorney, who had rushed in from the well, tip-toed to his side and whispered, "George, they're in bad trouble. They need you at the well."

Without any hesitation, Strake answered him, "Go back to the well and tell them that I'll be there when Mass is finished."

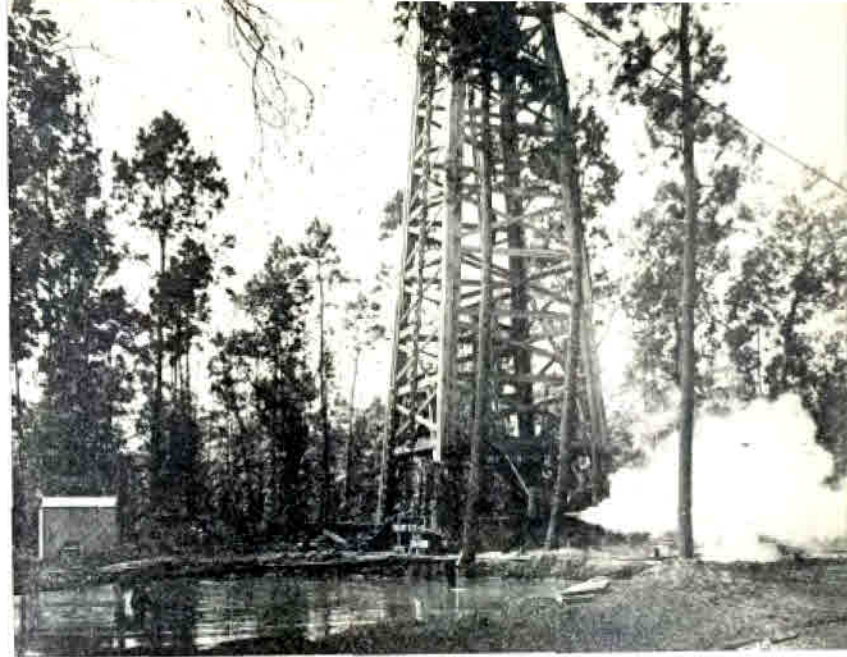
He returned to the well shortly before noon. But it was mid-afternoon before repairs were completed. And not until shortly before 5 p.m. did the shout go up, to echo in thrilling wave after wave after wave—"They've struck it! It's a well!"

Night began to fall, but the people still stayed and marvelled, fascinated that at last a paying well had been completed in Montgomery County after 31 years of trying—and that well belonged to Conroe.

But among the oil interests, there was a strange lack of excitement.

Most of them figured the well was a freak. Many said that it had not proved a thing. George W. Strake, undaunted, with the same confidence that had marked his bearing from the very beginning in 1929 when he started buying up leases, immediately began making plans for a second well—2,000 feet south of the discovery well.

Strake's first deal made on some of his large holdings was with Humble Oil Company in March, 1932.



In this quiet setting, the Great Conroe Oil Field was discovered. Today there are more than 900 producing wells in the area.

He got a call one morning from Wallace Pratt, Vice President and Chief Geologist for the Humble Company.

"Mr. Strake, you brought in that fine, big well near Conroe?" asked Mr. Pratt.

"Yes, sir," answered Mr. Strake.

"You own a terribly big block of acreage."

"Yes, sir," answered Mr. Strake.

"Want to sell any part of your holdings?"

"Yes."

"Well, Humble is interested in talking to you. Take your time, figure out a deal, then bring it to us."

Mr. Strake did just that. Using a pad of Western Union blanks he happened to have laying around, he added and subtracted acreage and production possibilities, finally coming up with what he thought was a mutually good deal.

He waited a week. Then he went to call on Mr. Pratt. He was kept waiting for several minutes by a secretary. Finally Mr. Strake suggested she inform Mr. Pratt that he was waiting.

She had hardly put down the phone when Mr. Pratt was out to shake Mr. Strake's hand.

"You're the man?" asked Mr. Pratt.

"Yes sir," answered Mr. Strake.

"Why, when I saw you I thought it must be your father who brought in that well in Conroe, because you are so young looking, why you look just like a kid."

"No sir," answered Mr. Strake, "it was I."

"Well," Mr. Pratt said, "Humble was too big and too smart

to see what you saw. We just knew too much. You brought us this thing and we turned you down. I guess we're getting ready to pay for that mistake."

He asked Mr. Strake to state his deal.

In answer, Mr. Strake tossed the yellow Western Union blanks across the desk.

Before picking up the blanks, Mr. Pratt asked him, "What do you think you have in Conroe?"

"I think it's tremendous," answered Mr. Strake.

Mr. Pratt picked up the Western Union blanks and read the deal.

Strake offered Humble the lease on 4,300 acres (about half his holdings) for a \$500,000 option, and a selling price of \$3.5 million to be paid out of oil produced from the field. He also wanted reimbursement of \$100,000 for drilling the discovery well, and another \$200,000 to finance two more wells, with the understanding Humble would also drill two wells.

Strake agreed to reimburse Humble the cost of wells, Humble would drill, to be paid out of oil produced, take over the two wells in the event Humble decided not to exercise its option.

"My word. Are you sure that's your deal? Why that's most reasonable," said Mr. Pratt, who immediately accepted it for Humble.

George Strake was no longer "poor-boying" it.

The Boom

A change, too, had come over Conroe.

Three and a half months before the well came in, Conroe had been just another listless little town gripped in the inertia of depression.

But Strake's determination, the doggedness and courage, and pure cussedness of a man who would take on the impossible, had stirred the people. While Strake drilled, they came out of their twilight-sleep to take notice.

They dared to hope again.

And the stage was set, when Strake brought in the well, for the people to throw off their listlessness and go to work to build a future for themselves and for Conroe.

Within 30 days after December 13, the population had jumped from less than 2,500 to a number estimated from 5,000 to 15,000 people.

Business was good. The newcomers *mushroomed out in all directions*, finding homes or renting rooms wherever they could find them, or pitching tents on any cleared ground available. The "boomers" of East Texas came rushing over to see if they couldn't get in on the ground floor at Conroe where they had missed it in East Texas.

Lease hounds by the hundreds invaded Conroe, setting up shop on the sidewalk, the street, or dealing from automobiles, cafe tables, or anywhere they could light.

In the wake of the rush, there came those who look for the easy pickings—the gamblers, the con-men, and the ruffians who strike a quick blow over the head at the edge of an alley, or steal silently through a bedroom window in the dead of night to rob their victims.

Sometimes there were as many as 10,000 people roaming around looking for jobs, and when they couldn't find them, they found trouble instead.

G. H. "Guy" Hooper was the sheriff at that time, and R. H. Wooldridge was chief of police.

They found themselves pretty busy. Conroe had no city jail and pretty soon prisoners were overflowing the small brick building that had been the county jail for so many years.

Chief Wooldridge put on two policemen to help him with the crowd. They were Eddie Stephen, present-day Chief, and "Punch" Wagers.

Sheriff Hooper soon solved the jail problem. He built a large stockade and when prisoners were brought in charged with minor crimes, into the stockade they would go.

Actually, a great many of those arrested were turned out after they had spent enough time in the stockade not to want to come back again. The courts were loaded with law suits and claim actions to the extent that there was little time left for anything else. Only those charged with major crimes ever came to trial, in most cases.

Mr. Wooldridge remembers that repeaters were not too frequent.

"After we picked up a man a couple of times, we just told him to get out of town and stay out. They knew we meant business," he said.

Strangely, this excitement was not reflected in the oil field.

Two months after it began, the boom slacked off.

With millions of cubic feet of gas being flared into the air, Strake began to worry about the possibility that the Texas Railroad Commission, which had taken stern measures to control East Texas, might move in and close him down. He decided to create a market for his production.

"I met a fellow who knew how to construct a 'bubble' plant. That's a cheap refinery where crude gasoline could be refined for commercial use."

"We set up the plant on the highway and ran a three-mile pipe line from my well to the plant. We produced a very high octane gasoline and sold to tank trucks to be hauled away to the large refineries to blend with cheaper gasoline. Not only had I found oil, I was making gasoline and selling it to the majors who had called the venture foolish. We also set up a pump. You know, there's just something about driving up to your own gas pump and filling up your tank with your own gas that makes a fellow feel good," he said.

Strake Strikes Oil

Again the rumors were spreading like wildfire.

"Strake hit a freak," some were saying.

"There's no market and the majors ain't coming in," others were saying.

The "boomers" got restless and began to move on. Business, which had been far beyond capacity, began to drop below the quickly-expanded facilities that had been set up to handle it. Some merchants were hurting.

It remained for George W. Strake, who had discovered the field, to prove it up.

He staked off his G. W. Strake No. 2—South Texas Development Co.

He spudded in during the last week of April.

Again, the word spread quickly.

So many people came to the site to see the second well spudded that the area had to be kept roped off so the workmen could attend to their duties.

Harvey Lee was again the driller. Having charted the first well so closely, he and Mr. Strake knew exactly where they were going when they started the second. This time, too, they had the money and the equipment.

The new location was 2,000 feet from the discovery well.

Down went the drill stem, constantly churning toward the



Conroe National Bank in Conroe. One of the two banks that afford the people of Conroe and vicinity complete and modern banking facilities.



Hotel Conroe in Conroe. A community hotel, demonstrating the faith of the local people in their city and county.



Montgomery County Hospital in Conroe. A 92-bed capacity hospital with the latest medical equipment available for use by local physicians. The hospital is completely air conditioned.



First National Bank in Conroe. Conroe has two modern banks that afford people in the trade territory with the latest in banking facilities.



Montgomery County Library in Conroe. The library was constructed in 1957 and has received much recognition for its architectural structure and beauty.

5,000-foot mark, with Strake determined to finish in one month what had previously taken three and a half months to do. He was aiming for May 29, and so sure was Strake that a well would make that he sent out notice of the day in advance so the people could come watch his well blow in.

Again, a mechanical failure kept Strake from bringing in his second well on time. But six days later, again on a Sunday, June 5, 1932, the well came roaring in.

It was up to everybody's expectations and more.

So great was the find that the Conroe Courier, a weekly newspaper then, called out its crew and put them to work on the only Sunday "Extra!" in the papers history.

A headline that took up the top half of the front page read, "STRAKE WELL COMES IN. GOOD FOR 10,000 BARRELS PER DAY."

Said the Courier on that date:

"The bringing in of this well as a good producer is the most important thing that has happened in the history of Montgomery County.

"All doubts are now removed that the Conroe field is a major field, and pending deals and investments will be made now that have been held in abeyance for weeks.

"Business has been good in Conroe these last few months and more especially the last several weeks, but the boom we have had amounts to nothing in comparison to what is to begin immediately. This town is destined to become a city."

The newspaper was prophetic.

The Aftermath

Following the second Strake success, there was renewed and strenuous activity with lease men buying, selling and trading, with it not uncommon for one lease to pass through five to 10 hands before it found a resting place.

Within 90 days after the second well, 75 operators were busy in the field. There were more than 500 locations and a network of pipe lines was being laid from one end of the field to the other.

A year from the date of Strake's discovery well, in December of 1932, there were 431 producers and 65,102 barrels of oil being produced every day.

Oil had truly brought prosperity. Long lines of traffic clogged the highways leading into Conroe.

Herman Heep brought in his first well just three days after the second Strake well, on June 8, with an estimated daily capacity of 3,000 to 5,000 barrels of oil.

While the crowds and the confusion were reminiscent of East Texas in many ways, production in the field was on a much more orderly basis and was not marked with either the violence or the conflict that marred the East Texas discovery.

Conroe became the first field to employ 20-acre spacing for wells. Because Strake controlled almost 50 per cent of the producing acreage, prospects of bootlegging were remote and with the majors taking an active interest from the beginning, the "war of the wildcats" was avoided.

As time passed, and more wells became producers, the vastness of Conroe became apparent and its boundaries defined at 19,000 acres.

Today, there are 940 producing wells in the Conroe field.

At the time his second well came in, through his deals with Humble and the leases he retained, Strake owned about 30 per cent of the potential wealth of the field.

Conroe nearly had a disaster in 1934 when a well being drilled by the Standard Oil Company of Kansas (not connected with the nationally known Standard Oil group) blew out. It blew with such tremendous force that all efforts to cap the well failed. Oil and gas were shooting out with terrific force, and the gas charged all the sands below the surface.

Nearby was a well owned by Dan Harrison and Jim Abercrombie. The gas ate away at the outside casing of the Harrison and Abercrombie well until one day it completely cratered. With the field completely out of control, millions of barrels of oil from the great oil sand filled the crater. Harrison and Abercrombie, acting under the law of capture, pumped out the oil and sold it. This was the basis and beginning of their present large fortune.

The escape of wild oil resulting in cutting the allowable for the entire oil field, with the exception of Harrison and Abercrombie who kept pumping from the crater.

Humble, the largest producer in the field, was standing the largest loss. Compelled to act in self-defense, Humble purchased the well and paid the entire cost of drilling a directional well



This is a lakeside view of Camp Strake, a 2700-acre grant near Conroe given to the Boy Scouts of America by George W. Strake, who discovered and proved the Great Conroe Oil Field.

—the first in Gulf Coast history—to reach the bottom of the cratered well.

About 5,000 feet down, from about a thousand feet away, the directional well intersected the cratered well. Mud was pumped into the formation and the flow of wild oil was successfully stopped, benefitting Humble and saving the Conroe field.

The cost to Humble for this operation has been estimated at close to \$500,000.

Today, the field is recognized as the third largest in the country, ranking behind East Texas and Kettleman Hills, California.

Through 1956, Conroe had produced approximately 362 million barrels of oil and at the present rate of production it should produce at least 30 more years.

Today, George W. Strake is one of Texas' wealthiest and most distinguished citizens.

Still an independent, he declines to put a finger on any estimate of the wealth at his disposal.

Today Strake is drilling an important wildcat well in Sterling County, in the center of a 16,000-acre tract, which bears well to be a success.

Should the field prove out and come up to Mr. Strake's expectations, he figures the value of this field should exceed \$25,000,000.

Since Conroe, Strake has remained active. He has put his wealth, his talent and initiative to work to provide new wealth for many people, to make this a better country and a better world in which to live.

He has brought in 11 oil and gas fields in Louisiana and Texas, and drilled wells as far east as Alabama and as far west as Colorado since his Conroe discovery. His combined subsequent discoveries, it is rumored, equal his Conroe venture.

An ardent Catholic and an outspoken Christian gentleman, Strake has made many bequests to his church and to many other charities—many of them privately and without fanfare. During recent years he presented the Boy Scouts of America with a 2,700-acre camp, the third largest in the United States and located four miles south of Conroe.

He holds perhaps the highest rank of any Catholic layman in the United States and the highest church honors ever conferred on an American layman by the church, all of them by the present Pope, Pius XII.

In 1937, Mr. Strake was made a Knight, Grand Cross, of the Holy Sepulchre. In 1940 he was received into the ranks of the Knights of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta.

It was in 1946 Pope Pius XII personally decorated Mr. Strake a Knight, Grand Cross, of the Order of St. Sylvester—the oldest and most prized of the Papal Orders.

Again in Rome, in 1950, the Pope elevated Mr. Strake to the rank of Supernumerary Private Chaplain of the Cape and Sword.



Conroe City Hall—the beautiful building was completed in 1956 and serves as the city hall, city jail and houses the equipment for the Conroe Volunteer Fire Department.



Business Administration building of the Conroe Independent School District. The building houses the business and tax departments of the school system.



The Montgomery County Courthouse, Conroe, Texas. One of the first public buildings completed after the discovery of oil in Conroe. The courthouse was completed in 1936.



William B. Travis Junior High School in Conroe. This is one of the six school plants in the Conroe Independent School District. The school district is considered to be one of the most outstanding in Texas and the picture above is typical of the buildings.



Residential scene in Conroe. The city is noted for the beautiful homes, paved streets and well manicured lawns.

Mr. Strake holds four honorary degrees from American universities.

Mrs. Strake has also been honored by the Pope, having received the medal Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice and having been declared Lady, Grand Cross, of the Holy Sepulchre.

Of his accomplishments, Mr. Strake speaks only with great reservation.

"I have dedicated every venture to God.

"How foolish I would be to say that George Strake alone discovered the great Conroe oil field, or any other, because I had God as my partner.

"I hope Divine Providence stays with me and never lets me commit the sin of pride in thinking I am a great man."

And what did George Strake's discovery mean to Conroe?

It meant first a reawakening. Then prosperity, stability, growth and progress.

Conroe was a sleepy country town on the wane, its future hinging on the doubtful continuation of the gradually diminishing sawmill and timber industry prior to the coming of George W. Strake.

Today, in the 25th year since the Conroe field was proved, Conroe is one of the proudest, prettiest, pleasantest little cities in all the state of Texas.

Its population rests right at a comfortable 15,000 mark, with enough capital made possible by oil royalties which have come to its citizens to provide investment money to keep the population at work.

Conroe is the county seat, and the Montgomery County courthouse occupies a beautiful and picturesque square in the very center of the community. Also located there is the Montgomery County Hospital.

Conroe's city hall is new, modern and the last word in 20th century style and construction. It stretches through a full city block, with a modern fire department housed behind.

By public subscription, Conroe has built a beautiful hotel to provide a convenient and pleasant stopping place for visitors to the city.

Its new county library would do justice to library buildings in any city of any size.

And what more?

In the reawakened, enlightened tomorrow that is still to come, Conroe has its sights set on goals that will lead to a still more beneficial community, to further increase in population, and to a continuation of that prosperity whose foundation was laid in 1929 when George W. Strake wandered down a creek bed and recognized his luck in a strata of Lagarto-Reynosa which turned out to be Conroe's luck, too.

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