

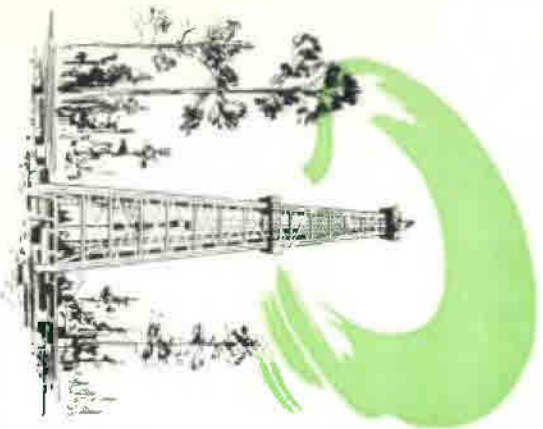
**THE GREAT
CONROE OIL FIELD**

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 ungrudgingly 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 strippling which had grown while other towns in the county had dwindled to a near nothingness.



Thom Rodgers



Ed S. Ashby



W. S. Siders



Henry Shiff



C. C. Morgan



Harvey Lee
Driller



Charlie Donovan



Bert Donovan



W. J. Stiffner Jr.



Dick Evans



O. S. Donovan

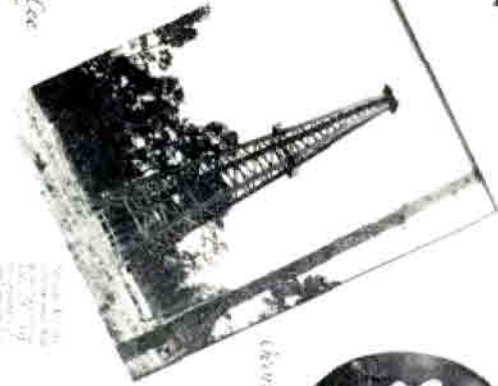
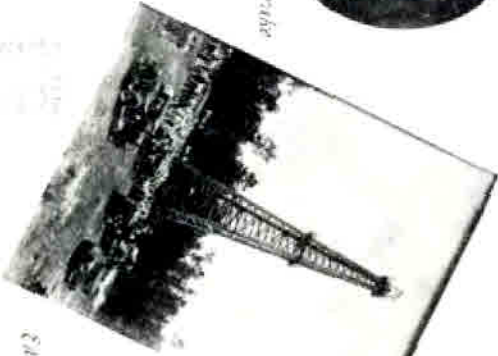


Photo by
The
Houston
Post-Office
of
the
Houston
Post-Office

George W. Strake



Ed
Lanning
Driller



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 blot 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 sparking 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.

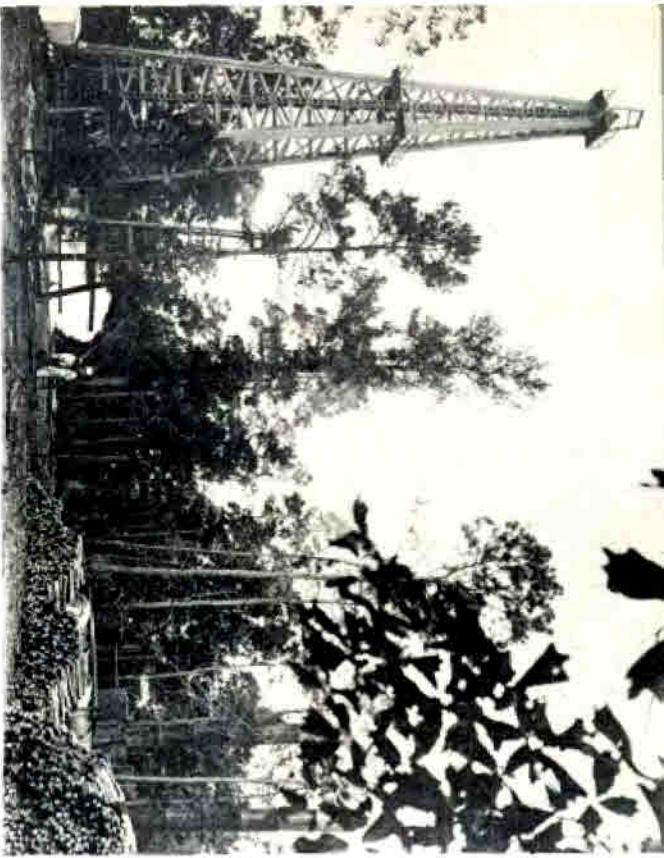
And where might that be?

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 Comroe 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 benefited 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.

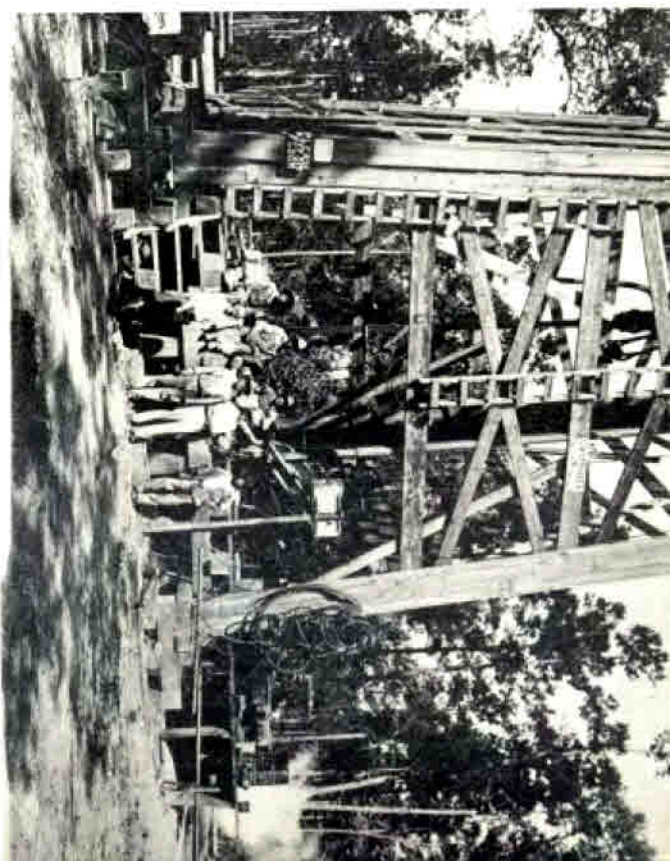
To this day, George W. Strake has remembered that lesson. Now he sits in the seat of the mighty, with so many successes behind him that he cannot count them all. But it is not the scorner's seat. George W. Strake knows what it is to fail and when it happens to another, his is the first voice of sympathy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

He was always a religious man. His early training, matured by the years he spent 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

