

TEN-BARREL "WHODUNIT" AT RED FORK

By Joe Donald Roberts*

Oklahoma is such an important part of the Mid-Continent Oil Field it is hard to remember that its first real oil boom was started by a ten-barrel show at Red Fork in June, 1901. Oil was no novelty in Indian Territory at the turn of the nineteenth century, but there had not yet been a boom. Then the Spindletop, Texas, gusher drew the attention of the world to a flood of oil. This discovery made people believe in big oil outside the Gulf and it made conditions right for another boom in this part of the country. As the Red Fork story illustrates, a boom can start with only a hint of oil for fuel. An oil boom requires, first and foremost, an accelerating sequence of acts of imagination. In its first days there is far more money going out than coming in. The mad scramble for a small hill at Spindletop had created a hunger which could not be satisfied there. The Red Fork promoters were the first after Spindletop to offer opportunity to the oil boomers. That object of all the attention was judged a mighty ten-barrel producer by a driller seemed to bother no one.

Once a boom begins it takes on a life of its own, but the first steps it to be taken by men, men whose identities often get lost in the shuffle. At Red Fork was the work of promoters whose identities are well known. Yet, through the years the answer to the obvious question "who drilled the first well at Red Fork?" has been a matter of dispute. The controversy has been a happy circumstance for historical purposes, however, for it has resulted in the accumulation and preservation of the Heydrick Collection.

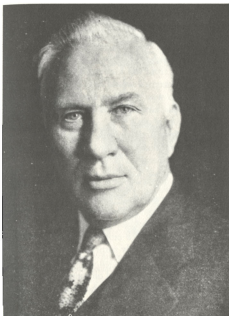
This remarkable record, in the Western History Collection of the University of Oklahoma Library, keeps alive both fact and flavor of Indian Territory's first real oil boom. It also states conclusively who drilled the well at Red Fork.

C. B. Glasscock notes the controversy in 1938 in *Then Came Oil*. "One faction gives all the credit to Dr. [J.C.W.] Bland and his friend and associate, Dr. Fred S. Clinton. Another faction accords the honor to Dr. Wick and Jesse A. Heydrick, oil promoters from Butler, Pennsylvania. Glasscock did not land hard on either side, but he was only able to give the view Dr. Clinton, sole survivor among the principals. Strongly implied in the Glasscock account is that the doctors had outmaneuvered Dr. Wick and Heydrick by filing a successful allotment in the name of Dr. Bland's Company."

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¹ C. B. Glasscock, *Then Came Oil* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), p. 132.

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Dr. Fred S. Clinton, who was deeply involved in the Red Fork controversy

wife on the land where the well was drilled. Wick and Heydrick, after all, had only a worthless lease to show in claiming mineral rights to the Sue A. Bland forty acres. Carl Coke Rister's 1949 account of the Red Fork discovery appears to settle the matter in favor of Heydrick and Wick.² In 1952, however, Dr. Clinton wrote an article in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* in which he stated with great assurance that he and Dr. Bland deserved the credit. Included in the evidence cited in the article was a photograph of the Oklahoma Historical Society marker, dedicated March 23, 1950, which gave credit to the two doctors. Dr. Clinton's account might have been the last word, except for the remarkable efforts of the sons of Jesse A. Heydrick.

²C. C. Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), pp. 81 ff.

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Not content to let the doctors' claim be accepted as fact, they compiled correspondence, legal documents, affidavits, published accounts and miscellaneous material in support of their father's claim to fame. The Heydrick Collection, accumulated roughly between 1930 and 1950, preserves a fascinating glimpse of those days in the oil business in Creek Nation. However, from the viewpoint of a disinterested observer it would seem that all concerned would have done more for posterity if they emphasized less who was "Number One" and emphasized more the fluid, panicky, outrageous circumstances that characterized attempts to produce oil in that time and place.

Of particular importance at Red Fork was the time. The process of allotting the tribal land and dissolving the Creek Nation was not complete. The guide in matters of mineral extraction and land tenure was the Creek Agreement, which superseded the Curtis Act of 1898.³ The agreement prevented allottees from alienating their land, and it contained no provisions for leasing arrangements even though it assigned mineral rights to individuals rather than the tribe. What this meant was that no clear title to land was available to oil promoters, nor could they lease mineral rights. The only people entitled to either were Creek citizens. What occurred in 1901, however, should only surprise those who confuse a turn of the century oil boom with the production of oil.

Heydrick and Wick were experienced oil men. Wick lived at Muskogee and it was his working relationship with the Creek tribal council that persuaded Jesse A. Heydrick to come out from Butler for a look. Near Seventy, Heydrick was forty years an oil man. What tempted him and his backers to take a chance on the Indian Territory was a lease, negotiated by Wick, which exchanged the sum of two dollars for mineral rights on 500,000 acres in the Creek Nation. This transaction would seem to compare favorably with the purchase of Manhattan Island except there was at least one overlapping lease.⁴ In addition, the Curtis Act and the Creek Agreement had made the lease's validity dubious at best. Heydrick and Wick tried to validate the lease in court by challenging the Curtis Act, to no avail.

Heydrick knew his business. He knew that the best way to turn a profit among all the uncertainties was to find oil, to have at least a fighting chance at rights to it and then to sell fast. This was not to be. The best he could manage was to find oil.

³ Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 86-88.

⁴ Affidavit of F. C. Hubbard, President, Creek Oil and Gas Co. in Heydrick Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

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J. C. Heydrick (front row, left) who was the son of Jesse Heydrick, received a letter from his father which declared, soon after the discovery of the Red Fork field, that he had an offer to purchase the discovery well (Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library)

To drill the well, Heydrick contracted with the Crossman Brothers of Joplin, who loaded their equipment on railroad cars and brought it to the end of the track at Red Fork.⁵ What happened next is vague in all accounts. Everyone agrees that the drillers were stuck at the depot, having only a New York draft which the agent would not accept for the freight charges. Glasscock implied that Doctors Bland and Clinton happened along to rescue some strangers.⁶ Not so. The Heydrick and Wick lease of July 16, 1900, which superseded leases of 1895 and 1899, shows the name of Sue A. Bland. According to one source, Dr. Bland helped negotiate this lease.⁷

⁵ Well log, Sue A. Bland Number One, Heydrick Collection.

⁶ Glasscock, *Then Came Oil*, p. 133.

⁷ J. W. Flenner, "History of Early Oil Developments in Oklahoma," Ch. 13, bound in booklet "Red Fork Discovery June, 1901," Heydrick Collection. Flenner says "Dr. Bland, formerly interested in the Progressive Oil Company and Red River Mining Company leases in this section, became of material assistance rendered Messrs. Heydrick and Wick in the securing of their blanket mineral lease had placed them under obligations to him, and for this reason the Pennsylvanians had at last bowed to Dr. Bland's wishes [to drill the Bland Forty]."

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Dr. Clinton claimed to have borrowed three hundred dollars from the station agent and loaned it to Perry Crossman, though Crossman denied it thirty years later.⁸ Dr. Bland's help with the lease and Dr. Clinton's loan to Crossman would seem to be the basis of their claim that they promoted and drilled the Sue A. Bland Number One, though Dr. Clinton's article only mentioned the loan. Sue A. Bland's land title has no bearing on the dispute. You can not make a hole with a land title.

That the doctors helped Heydrick and Wick is beyond doubt. Did that help make them interested parties? Rister says "It has been said that Heydrick was grateful for this service [Dr. Clinton's loan] and gave to each of them a share of his company's stock."⁹ W. H. Heydrick, one of Jesse's sons, denied this in a 1947 deposition:¹⁰

I remember well that Father said he intended to give Drs. Bland and Clinton each one share or unit of stock in the Red Fork well block as an appreciation for the favors and cooperation they had extended to Father and Mr. Wick; however, as litigation and lease trouble developed immediately after the well was brought in, the stock or unit was never issued.

Sure enough, the articles of incorporation of the three corporations Wick and Heydrick organized to explore the Creek Nation do not show the names of either Dr. Bland or Dr. Clinton. In fact, the only interested party with an Indian Territory address was Wick. The well log on the Sue A. Bland Number One shows only the names of Heydrick, Wick & Co. and



Such early day gushers as this was the result of the boom touched off by the Red Fork strike

⁸ Perry Crossman to J. C. Heydrick, September 3, 1931, in "Red Fork Discovery June 1901," Heydrick Collection.

⁹ Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest*, p. 83.

¹⁰ "Statement of W. H. Heydrick," June 1, 1947. Western History Collection.

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the Crossman Brothers. Perry Crossman, who was in charge of drilling the Well, said: "I made a personal contract with . . . J. A. Heydrick to drill the first well that produced oil. It was on the Dr. Bland forty acres and John Wick was only appointed to look after the drilling. His name was not in the contract."¹¹ Obviously, Crossman saw his obligation to the doctors as personal, and not involving the drilling operation.

The contradictions of Red Fork can best be explained by the tendency to expect things of events after the fact that no one expected at the time they occurred. Both Dr. Clinton and Jesse Heydrick admitted that they wanted most to promote a boom. Dr. Clinton put it this way:¹²

Many persons planned to drill for oil, and some had drilled wells in the hope of securing large approved leases in the Indian Territory. . . . It was my suggestion to Doctor Bland that we proceed immediately to initiate the oil development on the Sue A. Bland homestead adjoining Red Fork, and if we struck oil to give it the widest publicity; this would attract oil people and insure development.

The fact that the well was drilled not on a homestead but on unallotted land which was filed on after oil was discovered fits the picture. In a letter to his son, James C., written just after the discovery well came in, Jesse Heydrick mentioned an offer to buy the well and forty acres. Trying to decide whether to drill deeper or sell immediately, the elder Heydrick said "I will . . . use my judgement in matter of running tools again—a sale must be made while hot."¹³

It is easy, three generations later, to place undue emphasis on the land title which later came to Sue A. Bland. At the time of the discovery, Heydrick and Wick had a lease they thought had some chance of being approved. The doctors had nothing—no interest in the exploration corporation, no title to the land, no mineral rights, no part in the drilling contract. The plain truth is that if it had been up to the doctors to drill an oil well at Red Fork, it would not have happened.

The circumstance that played into Dr. Clinton's hands was that the well blew in before anyone expected it to. When it did, Heydrick was in Butler. Perry Crossman was in Joplin. Dr. Bland was down with appendicitis. Wick, who Perry Crossman accused of being drunk, ruined any chance his

¹¹ Crossman to Heydrick, September 3, 1931, in "Red Fork Discovery June, 1901," Heydrick Collection.

¹² Fred S. Clinton, "First Oil and Gas Well in Tulsa County," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 3 (Autumn, 1952), p. 312-313.

¹³ Ms. J. W. Flenner, "History of Early Oil Developments in Oklahoma," Heydrick Collection.

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interests had to profit with his jubilant telegram to "Send packer, Oil spouting over the derrick."¹⁴ The boom was on.

The only man who kept his head was Dr. Clinton. He took the course of action that had the sanction of law in the long run. Hastily, got power of attorney from Mrs. Bland, caught a train and made his way to Muskogee. It is truly remarkable, considering the communications of the time, that he was able to file a valid allotment in Muskogee June 1901—the day after the well blew in. For a small-town physician to so cleverly maneuver the pros was an historic feat. But that feat should not be confused with the promotion and drilling of the well.

The Heydrick family did little about the Red Fork discovery being attributed to the doctors until 1931, when John W. Flenner, a Muskogee newspaperman whose bad health had forced him to retire, contacted the sons of Jesse A. Heydrick. As a hobby, Flenner was writing a book about early oil developments in Oklahoma. He became fascinated with the Red Fork controversy, devoting two years to digging out the story. His manuscript, never published, is on file at the Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association in Tulsa. The parts of it pertinent to Red Fork are also in the Heydrick Collection. Flenner's research was thorough, and his conclusion was unequivocal: Heydrick and Wick drilled the well. The Heydricks asserted their claim in the *Tulsa World* March 15, 1934.¹⁵ But the *Tulsa World* of May 19, 1940, gave credit to doctors Bland and Clinton.¹⁶

In 1944 Keith Clevenger, an independent research consultant under contract to the Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association, contacted W. H. and L. C. Heydrick, two of Jesse's sons, and compiled a number of documents which he said "seem to confirm the fact that your father drilled the Red Fork well."¹⁷ Rister's book reasserted the Heydrick and Wick claim in 1949, but the Heydrick family was disappointed when the Oklahoma Historical Society erected a marker in 1950 giving credit to the doctors. Then in 1952, Dr. Clinton wrote his version of the dispute in the autumn number of *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*. There he stated that people who were in a position to know had testified that he and Dr. Bland were "responsible persons; i.e., answerable legally and morally for the payment of bills for drilling of the Bland-Clinton oil well. Even in that early day he said, "we were careful to be trustworthy in all our promotions."¹⁸

¹⁴ Crossman to Heydrick, September 3, 1901, in "Red Fork Discovery June, 1901" Heydrick Collection.

¹⁵ Clipping, Heydrick Collection.

¹⁶ Clipping, *Tulsa World*, March 15, 1934, Heydrick Collection.

¹⁷ Keith Clevenger to W. H. Heydrick, September 13, 1944, Heydrick Collection.

¹⁸ Clinton: "First Oil and Gas Well in Tulsa County" *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXX, p. 318.

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L. C. Heydrick was particularly displeased with these developments. He provided the family store of documents to the University of Oklahoma, and he paid an independent consultant, Dr. W. A. Settle of the University of Tulsa, to examine them and report his conclusions. Dr. Settle said:¹⁹

No competent and disinterested person could examine the Heydrick papers at the University of Oklahoma without concluding that Jesse A. Heydrick and John S. Wick deserve the credit for promoting and drilling the Red Fork discovery well, the Sue A. Bland No. 1.

There the controversy stands to date. However, the Heydrick Collection supports the conclusion that the doctors were of material assistance to Heydrick and Wick and outwitted them in the matter of land title. But Heydrick and Wick promoted and drilled the Sue A. Bland Number One.

¹⁹ W. A. Settle, "Report of Examination of Heydrick papers in Archives of University of Oklahoma Dealing with Red Fork Oil Discovery, June 25, 1901," Heydrick Collection.