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THE AMERICAN WELL AND PROSPECTING COMPANY

by Tommy Stringer

When oil was discovered in Corsicana in 1894, that community gave birth to the industry that has become synonymous with Texas. Since that discovery Corsicana has continued to play a leading role in the development and expansion of the petroleum industry. A major contributor to that growth was The American Well and Prospecting Company. Beginning as a small company specializing in drilling water wells, American Well and Prospecting expanded into a massive operation manufacturing oil field equipment which has been used in every major oil field in the world.

Founded in 1848, Corsicana, like dozens of other Northcentral Texas communities in the fertile blacklands, relied almost exclusively on cotton for its economic livelihood. Railroads came to Corsicana in the 1870s and brought transportation for both goods and people and attracted professional and mercantile groups to the community. The future looked bright for Corsicana throughout the 1880s as prosperity began to return following the Civil War and Reconstruction era. A shattering depression rocked the nation in the 1890s, however, and agriculture was especially hit hard. In 1894, cotton prices plunged to 4¼ cents on the Dallas Exchange, sending panic throughout the area.¹

Corsicana's civic and business leaders determined that something must be done to attack the problem of a single-staple economy. The Corsicana Commercial Club, a forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, was formed in 1894 for the purpose of attracting new industry to Corsicana.² While the community had such assets as railroads and a favorable climate to attract new industry, there was one glaring liability—the town's water supply was hopelessly inadequate to support industrial development. This obstacle must be overcome if new businesses were to be attracted.

Several community leaders chartered the Corsicana Water Development Company in the hope of finding new water supplies. That company negotiated a contract with the American Well and Prospecting Company to drill three artesian wells within the city limits of Corsicana.³ James Autry, president of both the Water Development Company and the Commercial Club, confidently predicted that the three wells would have a total daily flow of 750,000 gallons when completed. No pumping installations would be necessary since there was sufficient natural pressure to fill standpipes and storage tanks.⁴

The American Well and Prospecting Company had been organized

in 1890 as a co-partnership by H. G. Johnston and Charles Rittersbacher, two men of different backgrounds who had met in Kansas. They first came to Texas in 1891 to drill a water well in the Marlin area.⁵ Little did they realize what tremendous opportunities lay ahead for them.

Horace Greeley Johnston was born in 1851 near Canton, Ohio. In addition to attending Canton Public Schools, Johnston studied surveying and civil engineering at Greensburg Seminary in the Canton area. Prior to becoming involved in drilling, H. G., as he was called by his friends, worked as a surveyor and in railroad construction. His first experience in drilling wells began in the Kansas salt fields using cable tools. Near Salina, Kansas, Johnston met Charles Rittersbacher and they formed the American Well and Prospecting Company.⁶

Charles Rittersbacher was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1857. While still a boy he moved by covered wagon with his family to Salina, Kansas. He helped with the family farm before becoming involved in the drilling operations with Johnston. Rittersbacher moved his wife and children to Corsicana where he and Johnston had contracted to drill a water well for the Corsicana State Children's Home, which was located west of town.⁷ There the company added a third partner, Emil Aiken, a friend of Johnston's from "back East." Little is known about Aiken, who sold his interests in the company to the two original partners only a short time later.⁸

After completing the State Home well, American Well and Prospecting then contracted with the city of Corsicana and the Corsicana Water Development Company to drill three wells within the city limits to increase the community's water resources. Work began on the first well in the spring of 1894. The drilling site was on South Twelfth Street, near Corsicana's business district. On June 9 drilling had reached a depth of 1,035 feet when crewmen noticed crude oil filling the shaft and rising to the surface. Efforts to seal off the crude failed and it saturated the ground around the drilling site. Workmen constructed a ditch to drain the oil seepage to an earthen tank nearby. An estimated 150 gallons of crude flowed daily into the tank as drilling continued on the water well. The water well was eventually completed at a depth of 2,470 feet.⁹

Initial reaction to the discovery of oil ranged from apathy to irritation. Few among the local citizenry comprehended the significance of the discovery, and the workmen were upset because of the delay which the oil caused in completing the water well. The drilling company indicated that they had no plans for utilizing the oil. After all, their business was to drill water wells.¹⁰

Ralph Beaton and H. G. Damon, neither of them associated with the Water Development Company, secured samples of the crude and sent them to Pennsylvania. Tests indicated that Corsicana's crude had commercial value for fuel and for refining purposes. Beaton and Damon formed the Corsicana Oil Development Company to "push development and the work of boring as many wells as possible as fast as the work could be done." Lacking capital, Beaton and Damon engaged in a frantic leasing operation to reserve drilling rights on town lots in the vicinity of the water well. The noted team of wildcat drillers, John H. Galey and James M. Guffy, arrived in Corsicana to lend their expertise to the development of the Corsicana field. Work began on a new well just south of the original water well, but this time oil, not water, was the objective. On October 15, 1895, this well was completed at a depth of 1,040 feet, marking the beginning of the first Texas oil field. A second well drilled only 700 feet from the water well proved to be a duster, but a third well at Fourth and Collins Streets produced twenty-two barrels of crude per day. Two more wells completed on July 1 and August 5 of 1896, each yielded twenty to twenty-five barrels per day.¹²

By the end of 1897 Corsicana had fifty-seven wells yielding 66,000 barrels of oil annually. A year later the number of wells had increased to 342 and production totalled 544,000 barrels. By the end of 1900 the field expanded eastward, soaring production to 836,000 barrels.¹³

Joseph S. Cullinan came to Corsicana at the invitation of town fathers to aid in the development of the Corsicana field. A native of Pennsylvania, Cullinan had been involved in virtually every aspect of the oil industry as an executive of Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. He had founded his own company to manufacture storage tanks. Thus, he brought a wide range of experience to Corsicana. Cullinan introduced marketing and production techniques and secured needed capital. The capstone of his contributions was the construction of a refinery south of town which began operations January 1, 1898. It was the first refinery west of the Mississippi River.¹⁴

The role of American Well and Prospecting changed with the expansion of the Corsicana field. Although the company was involved in some drilling operations, they devoted more time to repairing drilling equipment in a small machine shop they opened on 7th Street, just east of the city's business district. They had opened the shop primarily to repair their own equipment, but demand from other drilling contractors became so great they began to devote almost all their time to this phase of the business.¹⁵

The company entered into yet another phase around 1900. Two brothers, M. C. and C. E. Baker, itinerant water well drillers, were

attracted to Corsicana because of the oil development. They brought with them some rotary-drilling equipment which they had utilized for the previous sixteen years in Louisiana, Texas, Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. In 1882 they had added the use of hydraulic principles which speeded up the drilling process. A stream of water was funneled down the outside of the drill pipe. Loose dirt and rock then were washed through the hollow pipe to the surface. The Bakers later began funneling water down the drill pipe and through the bit. This proved even more effective in washing loosened materials to the surface. Pumps were used to provide sufficient pressure to flush water through the drilling pipes. Lacking steam or internal combustion engines, the Bakers erected windmills to power their crude but effective hydraulic system.¹⁶ The method proved both faster and less expensive than the more conventional cable tool method.

About 1900 the American Well and Prospecting Company purchased patent rights from the Baker brothers to manufacture and distribute the rotary equipment. This marked the beginning of the role for which American Well and Prospecting was most noted—the manufacture and distribution of drilling equipment.¹⁷

Because of his interest and background in civil engineering, Johnston assumed a leading role in the improvement of the Baker equipment as well as the development of new equipment. Eventually the plant manufactured all the equipment for the rotary drilling unit—the rotary table, draw works, traveling block, crown block, and mud pumps. Johnston dubbed his equipment “Gumbo Buster” because of the speed with which it drilled through the gumbo-type soil of the Corsicana field.¹⁸

American Well and Prospecting equipment found its way to every major oil field in the world. It was a Corsicana rig operated by the Hamill brothers of Corsicana that drilled the Lucas gusher at Spindletop in 1901, ushering in the age of oil to the Texas Gulf Coast region.¹⁹

In 1903 oil was discovered in Oklahoma and Charles Rittersbacher moved his family to Bartlesville. He distributed American Well and Prospecting equipment throughout that area. In 1909 he moved his family once again, this time to Los Angeles, California. Again his purpose was to distribute American Well and Prospecting equipment in the newly-discovered California fields. He organized the American Contract and Drilling Company in Los Angeles, and through that company he developed the holdings of the Mocal Oil Company. Eventually Rittersbacher bought complete interests in Mocal, including those owned by Johnston, making it a family-owned venture.²⁰

Charles Rittersbacher died in Los Angeles in 1919, and his son

Elmer (1891-1974) returned to Corsicana to become actively involved in the management of American Well and Prospecting. The company's stock was divided equally between the Johnston and Rittersbacher families, and both families were enthusiastically involved in the plant's operations.²¹

"H. G. Johnston served as president of the company until his death in 1930. In addition to his association with American Well and Prospecting he had extensive real estate holdings in Corsicana and was a director and vice-president of the old Corsicana National Bank."²²

American Well and Prospecting continued to expand and prosper. New discoveries such as the Mexia field in 1921, the Powell field in 1923, and the giant East Texas field in 1930 greatly increased the demand for equipment manufactured by the American Well and Prospecting Company.

American Well and Prospecting employed from 100 to 350 persons, the number varying according to conditions in the petroleum industry. With this many persons on their payroll, American Well and Prospecting became a vital part of Navarro County's economy. Not only did the company have a local impact but its importance was felt throughout the world. Gumbo Buster equipment was shipped to new fields throughout the United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.²³

The United States was plunged into World War II when the Japanese attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Despite strong indications of eventual United States involvement in the war, preparations were woefully lacking. When war did come, the United States economy was rapidly converted to war-time manufacturing. Federal authorities sought out those industries that could be utilized for the production of much-needed war materials and awarded contracts to those companies for the manufacture of specified items. American Well and Prospecting was among the hundreds of United States businesses that contributed greatly to the war effort as the nation dedicated itself to the war effort.

The plant's operations were converted exclusively to the production of munitions and other war related items. An around-the-clock schedule was implemented and the number of employees increased to more than one thousand.²⁴ In May 1942, the company received a contract from the government to manufacture a 1000-pound semi-armor-piercing bomb. Although American Well and Prospecting was the fifth company in the nation to contract for production of the 1000-pound bomb, it was the first actually to produce them.²⁵

In December 1942, the company received another contract, this

one to manufacture 240 millimeter shells, and eight months later yet another contract for the manufacture of ships' anchors for the Navy. Because of the valuable contributions made to the war effort, American Well and Prospecting was awarded the "E Flag" in June 1943. A star was added to the company's flag six months later.²⁷

The year 1944 brought a major change for American Well and Prospecting. A transaction was completed June 30 providing for the sale of all outstanding stock of the company to Bethlehem Steel Company of Pennsylvania. Expenditures in the purchase, which included all inventories, properties, and assets, totalled \$894,929.²⁸

Although owned by Bethlehem, the company retained its name and all persons employed by American Well and Prospecting at the time of the sale were also retained. G. A. Tompson of Tulsa, Oklahoma, vice-president of the Bethlehem Supply Company, was named vice-president and general manager of the Corsicana plant. Elmer Rittersbacher, who had served as company president since the death of H. G. Johnston in 1930, was named plant manager, and Lowell R. Estes was appointed assistant plant manager. S. D. Goins was general plant manager, and Eliot Johnston was in charge of personnel. C. M. Anderson was chief engineer, William Maxwell foundry foreman, and P. A. Simpson manager of the pattern shop.²⁹

Edgar Rittersbacher, who had been American Well and Prospecting vice-president, was transferred to the Bethlehem Supply Company as special district sales representative. He continued to reside in Corsicana, however.³⁰ Lee Fagg, the assistant chief engineer with American Well and Prospecting, was transferred to Tulsa where he assumed duties as rotary machine engineer for the Bethlehem Supply Company.³¹

When the company changed hands in 1944 the new owners planned an expansion program with a greatly increased payroll. However, competition in the area of manufacture of oil field equipment increased dramatically, and hard times in general rocked the petroleum industry. Because of these financial difficulties, Bethlehem closed the Corsicana plant in 1959, bringing an end to the American Well and Prospecting Company. Today the property is occupied by Faraway Places Garden Center. Owners Ed Erwin and Kent Dusing refurbished the facility, making it attractive without destroying the original appearance of the buildings.

The history of the petroleum industry cannot be written without including the contributions of the American Well and Prospecting Company. By drilling the first oil well in the Mid-Continent field, American Well and Prospecting raised the curtain on the Texas oil

drama. The world-wide distribution of Gumbo Buster equipment made American Well and Prospecting an operation of international importance. Through the manufacture of munitions and other war related materials, the company played a vital role in the American victory in World War II. By employing literally thousands of persons the company was a major contributor to the economic stability of Navarro County for more than half a century. The community of Corsicana, the United States, and the world are indebted to H. G. Johnston, Charles Rittersbacher, Emil Aiken, and the thousands of persons who contributed to the growth and development of the petroleum industry through the American Well and Prospecting Company.

NOTES

¹Dallas Morning News, December 8, 1894.

²Records of Corsicana Chamber of Commerce.

³Minutes, Corsicana City Council, March 6, 1894. On file in office of City Clerk.

⁴Morrison and Fourmy's *General Directory of the City of Corsicana, 1894-95*. (Galveston, 1894), 7. Other officers in the Water Development Company were Charles Allyn, Secretary, and James Garrity, Treasurer.

⁵Family records of Charles Rittersbacher provided by his daughter, Miss Egga Rittersbacher.

⁶Navarro County History, II, 137. Personal interview with Eliot Johnston, July 16, 1980. Johnston is the son of H. G. Johnston.

⁷Rittersbacher Family Records.

⁸Eliot Johnston Interview.

⁹John O. King, *Joseph Stephen Cullinan: A Study of Leadership in the Texas Petroleum Industry, 1897-1937*. (Nashville, 1960), 14.

¹⁰Dallas Morning News, June 15, 1894.

¹¹Dallas Morning News, October 18, 1897.

¹²Charles Warner, *Texas Oil and Gas Since 1543*. (Houston, 1939), 26-27.

¹³U. S. Mineral Resources, 1896, III, 848. U. S. Mineral Resources, 1898, III, 106. George C. Matson and Oliver B. Hopkins, *The Corsicana Oil and Gas Field, Texas*, U. S. Geological Survey Bulletin No. 661F. (Washington, 1918), 213, 247.

¹⁴For a complete biography of Cullinan see John O. King, *Joseph Stephen Cullinan: A Study of Leadership in the Texas Petroleum Industry, 1897-1937*. (Nashville, 1960).

¹⁵Eliot Johnston Interview.

¹⁶J. E. Brantley, "Hydraulic Rotary Drilling Systems," in *History of Petroleum Engineering*, edited by D. V. Carter.

¹⁷Brantley, *History of Petroleum Engineering*, 300-301.

¹⁸Eliot Johnston Interview.

¹⁹Alva Taylor, *Navarro County History*, (Corsicana, 1962), 177. One of the Baker's rotary drilling rigs is on display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C.

²⁰Rittersbacher Family Records.

²¹Rittersbacher Family Records.

²²Johnston Family Records.

²³Eliot Johnston Interview. Johnston served as plant personnel manager.

²⁴Interview with Lowell Estes, May 23, 1981. He joined the company in 1924 and remained until the plant closed in 1959.

²⁵*Corsicana Daily Sun*, June 30, 1944.

²⁶Personal interview with Lowell Estes, May 23, 1981. Mr. Estes was responsible for government contracts during the war.

²⁷*Corsicana Daily Sun*, June 30, 1944.

²⁸Bethlehem Steel Company Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The Republic Supply Company had been the exclusive distributor of Gumbo Buster equipment since the early 1920's. In October, 1939, Bethlehem Supply Company became distributor for the complete line of Gumbo Buster Equipment.

²⁹*Corsicana Daily Sun*, June 30, 1944.

³⁰Edgar Rittersbacher (b. 1899) spent several years with Mocal, the family owned oil operations in California. He had a degree from the University of California at Berkeley. He came to Corsicana shortly after Johnston's death to assist his brother in the management of American Well and Prospecting. After retiring from Bethlehem, Rittersbacher served as postmaster in Corsicana for several years. He passed away February 29, 1972, and is buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Corsicana. Elmer Rittersbacher returned to California following his retirement from Bethlehem, spending his last years with his sister Etta at the family home in Hollywood. He passed away December 29, 1974.

³¹*Corsicana Daily Sun*, June 30, 1944.