

Researching Oil in California's History

Oil is an important topic of discussion in California and has been one almost since the state's admission to the Union. Exploratory oil drilling first took place in the mid-1850s and increased over the next decade as gold fever died down and Californians began to look for other natural resources to develop. The popularity of the automobile and the development of the airplane accelerated the process. Large oil fields in Tulare, Kern, Ventura, and Los Angeles Counties were tapped, and their landscapes became forests of tall oil derricks. In Southern California this phenomenon spread offshore as well, resulting in a seascape few people in earlier decades could have envisioned. This Short Subject highlights the California State Library's (CSL) published, documentary, and visual resources about oil as well as one of our many hidden treasures.

The California History Section curates and preserves material covering every era and aspect of oil development in this state, from books and periodicals to equipment catalogs, photographs, maps, advertising, internal company documents, and personal correspondence. This material is of interest to researchers, and gives those dealing with oil matters in the present day an idea of how these issues developed over time.

PUBLISHED RESOURCES

Historical resources galore! This statement describes the vast variety of available publications in the California History Section of CSL about the history of oil in California. Absorb an oil history overview by reading Fred Cook's *Historic Legends of Western Oil, Volume I*. View a chronology by the Western Oil and Gas Association, *Highlights of California's Petroleum History, 1855-1964*. Include historical accounts, such as *Formative Years in the Far West: History of Standard Oil Company of California and Predecessors through 1919*, by Gerald T. White, or *Spudding In: Recollections of Pioneer Days in the California Oil Fields*, by William Rintoul. See the thesis, *Geographic*



Calpet Service Station, Los Angeles, ca. 1920, California History Room, accession # 1992-0667

Consequences of Oil-Land Tenure at the Midway-Sunset Oil Field, by Bret Wallach (1968). View specific indexes such as *Kern River Oil Fields Index* and *Coalinga Oil Fields Index* that contain special oil region maps by Barlow and Hill. Browse titles about historic disasters and concerns: *The Santa Barbara Channel Oil Disaster*, 1969, by Charles E. McCarty, and *Scientists in Conflict: The Beginnings of the Oil Industry in California*, 1968, by Gerald T. White. Round out a picture of oil history in California by searching the main catalog for reports, interviews with oil industry persons, and biographies of oil companies and oil magnates.

DOCUMENTARY RESOURCES

The California History Section also contains an extensive collection of primary documents concerning the topic of oil, which give a firsthand look at the inner workings of the industry. One example is an April 1922 Assignment of Oil and Gas lease to E. Alfred Grey and

his wife Nan Grey, in Kern County. Another is the Max Shaffrath Coalinga Correspondence. Written on Pacific Oil Company (a predecessor of Standard Oil of California) letterhead, Shaffrath often describes minutiae such as the price of oil per barrel, local railroad extensions, locations where new wells had recently struck oil, and drilling companies with which Pacific Oil had made arrangements. The papers of former California governor James N. Gillett contain documents relating to his stint as attorney and lobbyist for the Associated Oil Company and the Oil Industry Association, much of which had to do with lease permits, ownership of stock, and pending State Legislature bills relating to the oil industry. The Bolsa Oil Lease Documents chronicle the story of members of a gun club who jointly bought property at Bolsa Chica Beach in Orange County, where oil was subsequently discovered. While the original tenants and their descendants continued to hold subsurface rights to this property, surface rights eventually passed to the State of California for a State Beach.

VISUAL RESOURCES

The breadth of the visual resources available in the California History Section is tremendous. Images of the oil industry range in date from the 1880s to the 1960s and span the entirety of the state. There is a large concentration of images of Kern County oil fields. Additional photographs show landscapes of oil derricks and others show laborers at work. The California History Section also has photos of service stations and oil company headquarters. Some of these images are in books and periodicals; some are loose photos in file folders. In addition to photographs, the History Section has a large collection of ephemeral materials that include graphically striking advertisements for oil products, business letterheads, labels, and stickers.

HIDDEN TREASURES

The California Information Files are a hidden treasure at CSL. This important resource is an index to newspaper articles, magazine articles, manuscript collections, books, and more. If you are wondering why you cannot find a book about a California topic in our online catalog, you will probably want to check the information file. It offers a macro-level view of material, often page-by-page in a book, magazine, or newspaper. For example, the topic of petroleum includes over 1,150 individual cards with more than 2,000 citations indexed from such wide-ranging items as the Henry McCartney manuscript collection to



Sea Wall and Derricks, Huntington Beach, ca. 1930, California History Room, accession # 2004-0272

articles about Humboldt County petroleum in the Sacramento Union from 1859. The current information file is a continuation of the original file, which covered the time period 1846 to 1985 when the card file was closed and microfilmed. The original card file, housed in the California History Room, is also available on micro-fiche in the history room and at numerous libraries across the United States. The California Information File II is the continuation file. It began in 1985 and continues to the present day with librarians from the California History Section indexing materials daily. The California Information File II is available via the web at:

dbs.library.ca.gov/dbtext_html/QueryCalinfo.htm

Additional resources may be found in the other public service units of the California State Library including the Government Publications Section, the Witkin State Law Library and the Information Services Section.

The California Research Bureau is a division of the California State Library, providing in-depth research and nonpartisan public policy analysis to members of the State Legislature and the Governor.
www.library.ca.gov/

The California History Section is a division of the State Library Services Bureau of the California State Library. The California History Section holds a major collection of material from and about California's rich history. www.library.ca.gov/calhist/index1.html

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