

# Titusville, Pennsylvania – Oil - - Salt - - Tarbell

by *Lynne Belluscio*

The Historical Society's fall bus trip took us to the town of Titusville, Pennsylvania. The interest in Titusville was because of the Drake Oil Well historic site, and in particular questions about the technology of drilling the salt wells in LeRoy. The first LeRoy salt well was drilled in February 1879 by the Vacuum Oil Company of Rochester. Salt water and methane gas were hit at 450 feet and spouted 50 feet in the air. It was such a sight, that people took the train from Rochester to see the ice covered wooden derrick. The salt well was abandoned for two years, because the drilling supervisor was more interested in promoting another salt well site south of LeRoy, in the village of Wyoming. A court case ensued and in the fall of 1881, Vacuum Oil drilled a second well for the LeRoy investors. In the meantime, Vacuum Oil was acquired by Standard Oil Company (Which is another part of the Titusville story.)

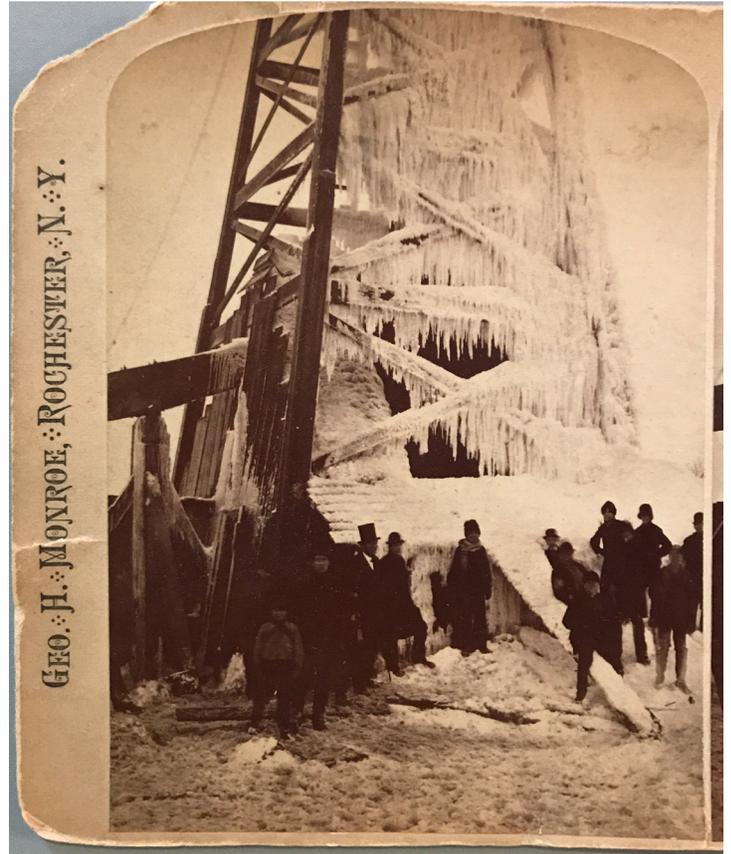
Drilling equipment can be seen in the stereo card of the LeRoy salt well and I wanted to learn more about how these early drill bits and tools were used. Last year, I went to Syracuse to visit the Salt Museum, and unfortunately, this local museum has seen better days. My visit only created more questions. In the meantime, I learned of the Drake Oil Well Museum in Titusville and was told that their exhibits were worth the trip. In fact I discovered that an old museum friend was the curator at Drake. And although the Drake site was about oil, the early oil drillers borrowed the technology from the early salt drillers. Titusville claims to be the first drilled oil well. In fact, the DAR protected the site for many years and the Drake Well was made a National Landmark site in 2009. (Mind you, only the hole in the ground is recognized as a National Landmark.) In 1859, Edwin Drake, using the technology of drilling salt wells, drilled along the banks of Oil Creek in Verango County. The well was 69 1/2 feet deep. Previously oil was gathered

from springs or hand dug wells that brought oil to the surface. The oil was gathered in towels and wrung out. It's important to understand that at this time, oil was used medicinally and for lubrication, but a newly developed process that utilized petroleum for lighting was creating a bigger demand.

In 1851, Samuel Kier, known as the "Grandfather of the American Oil Industry", began selling lamp oil, which he called "Carbon Oil" made from distilled petroleum. It is interesting to note, that he began the business, because the oil was fouling his salt wells and he needed to find a use for the black liquid which he dumped in the local creek. The introduction of carbon oil for lighting was a critical departure from the use of whale oil and it created the demand for crude oil. (By 1860, the use of whale oil for lighting had disappeared.) For clarification, carbon oil, made from distilled petroleum became known as kerosene, but the term Kerosene (with a capital K) originally was a trademark for coal oil, which was made from distilled coal, not distilled petroleum.

When Edwin Drake first started drilling near Titusville, the well collapsed, and he borrowed the technology of sinking an iron shaft into the ground as the well was drilled. The shaft prevented the sand and the surrounding rock from falling back into the hole. The early method of drilling wasn't really drilling as we know it. The hole was created by pounding or percussion drilling which is how the salt wells in LeRoy were drilled.

Another curious connection to Titusville and LeRoy is a woman by the name of Ida Tarbell. She was fourteen when her family moved to Titusville. Her father was an owner of one of the small oil wells, and she saw the economic disaster which befell all the small oilmen when John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil took over. It was known as the "Cleveland Massacre." Her father went bankrupt and his business partner committed suicide. Tarbell left Titusville in



*LeRoy salt well. Notice drilling tools leaning against the derrick on the left.*

1876 to attend Allegany University and eventually she became one of the first American investigative reporters. She exposed the unfair practices of Rockefeller in a two volume book, "The History of Standard Oil" which was published in 1904. She was labeled a "muckraker" by President Theodore Roosevelt, although she objected to the term. Her book is credited with the 1911 Supreme Court ruling that found Standard Oil in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and ordered it broken into 34 separate companies. (Rockefeller still owned controlling stock in all 34 companies, and actually benefitted from the ruling.) However, it is in Tarbell's book, that the story of Vacuum Oil, Standard Oil, and the LeRoy Salt Company is chronicled.

Just yesterday, while working with papers in the LeRoy Historical Society archives, Sam Leadley discovered a cache of letters from Vacuum Oil. So the research continues and maybe more of the Vacuum Oil story in LeRoy will be revealed.

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