

Oil and the Roaring Twenties

BY MARCELLINE BLAKLEY

The Roaring Twenties—an apt term for the decade when the words oil and growth would become synonymous in the booming city of Huntington Beach. Though its wealthy oil fields would bring Huntington Beach fame and make many of its landholders wealthy, it was purely by chance that oil was originally discovered in the city.

Long before petroleum engineering was actually a proven science, Standard Oil hired some young geologists. One of them, who had done some research in Southern California, came to the conclusion that the area between what is now Goldenwest Street and Beach Boulevard would yield petroleum. It took him two years to persuade Standard Oil officials to drill. Sure enough, well A #1 came gushing in and within six months there were upwards of 800 drilling rigs operating in the area. As if to broadcast that the rush was on, the Bolsa Chica #1 well blew in in November of 1920 with a roar that could be heard 15 miles away. After that people poured into Huntington Beach like there was a gold rush. Hundreds of corporations were formed in hopes of striking oil, though in some cases their lease-

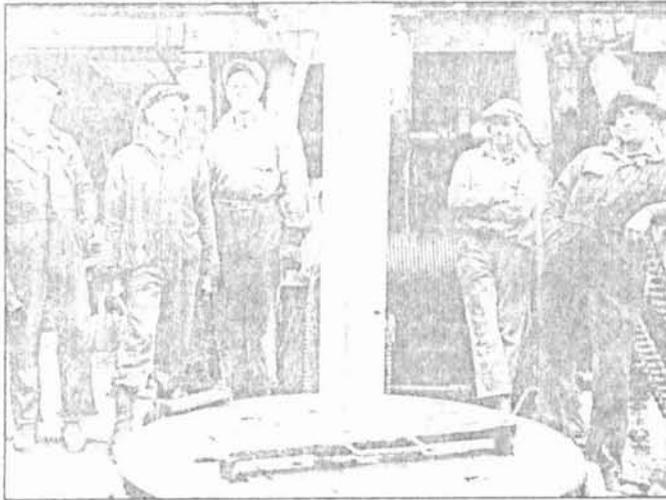
holdings were as small as a single city lot.

According to city historian Bud Higgins, it was possible for one to arrive in Huntington Beach, go to one of five pool halls that doubled as hiring halls, and start working within a half hour, a fact which accounts for the total industrial payroll of the city rising from \$4,000 per month in 1920 to \$250,000 per month by the next year.

lease or buy a small patch of land, set up an oil derrick, then seek prospective victims among the crowds arriving daily in search of employment. The con men would bring people back to the site, serve them a chicken dinner and hit them with a sales pitch to buy shares of stock in the land. It was later discovered that some leases had as many as 1,000 owners. On the other hand, many were able to beat the cons at their own game by ducking out after the chicken dinner to look for a job.

With crime on the rise in the growing town, a police department headed by Marshall Jack Tinsley was established in June of 1921. Tinsley was also the city inspector and fire chief.

The fire department itself was founded as a volunteer organization in 1918, but the oil boom of the early Twenties caused it to be reorganized using the American Legion and World War One veterans as volunteers. The fire pump driver, however, was a full time employee who lived in the station house and was on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When a fire was reported, a siren at city hall and a steamboat whistle at the Standard Oil boiler house alerted volunteers. They received five dollars



Oil Rig Workers Feb. 10, 1927

Along with those who flocked to Huntington Beach in search of work however, came the people seeking to take advantage of the rapid growth in the town: gamblers, bootleggers, prostitutes and con men. Con artists would

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for the first three hours of fire fighting, and one dollar for every hour after that. A practice drill paid two dollars.

In 1924 the fire department moved into its first adequate headquarters at Fifth and Orange Streets. It housed

civic center complex and city hall were erected on 3.23 acres facing Orange Street between Fifth and Sixth in 1922.

The opening of Pacific Coast Highway was celebrated in March of 1925,

1922. Other visitors were also drawn to the pier; one making front page news in 1924 was a "monster whale" swimming off Huntington Beach. Witnesses guessed the giant's size to be 30 feet—an extraordinary sight for the



Tent City, Huntington Beach

two stalls, each containing two fire pumps, and a six man dormitory.

In 1927 an entire city block was destroyed when an explosion at the Alfred Gasoline Plant set fire to all the derricks. The loss, which exceeded several million dollars, resulted in the separation of the police and fire departments with James K. Sargeant appointed fire chief in 1928.

Along with crime and numerous oil fires, Huntington Beach faced other problems throughout the Twenties, namely a shortage of adequate housing. The upshot of this was a section of town called "Cardboard Alley," a block of small cabins constructed of cheap, thin board which rented for \$30-\$35 per month. Many individuals were forced to share quarters with other people and some even resorted to setting up housekeeping in tents. In fact, many oil companies were forced to set up camps on their leased land in order to give their employees a place to live.

With the population on the rise (growing from 1500 to 6000 virtually overnight) many businesses were opened to cater to the city's expanding needs. By the mid-twenties, Huntington Beach could claim three banks, a hospital, a full-time Western Union office and businesses of every kind, bringing the city a long way from the early days of crudely graded streets with oil spread on them. A

and Huntington Beach residents were proud of the fact that the widest section of paving—80 feet—ran through their city. Two more signs of the city's tremendous growth were the opening of a new high school with an enrollment of 421 in 1927, and the attendance of 50,000 at the traditional Fourth of July celebration of 1928.

The pier was a major attraction throughout the Twenties, and most recreation was centralized near it. It was there that Duke Kahanamoku first showed Orange County how to surf in

day.

The pavillion that stood next to the pier housed a bowling alley, restaurant, and candy store. The road between Main Street and Garfield was lined with numerous small restaurants. A dance hall inside a large tent drew crowds with its advertisement of "Good, Clean Dancing Every Night Except Monday."

Though Huntington Beach was a boom town that grew up around oil, it was not unlike many other small towns of "The New Era." Organized



The North Side of the Pier (1927)