

Oil Boom Recalled

Pioneer Writes of Huntington Era

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Oscar L. Stricklin, now 85, knows his memory of Huntington Beach's wild and woolly oil boom years will soon fade away with age.

Rich with images of history — from listening to one of the first crystal radios and uncovering a mass grave — it has all been preserved for future generations in his own autobiography.

Though his story is only that of an average man who worked hard all his life as oil rig builder, bean farmer and horse rancher, the first 100 copies have already been grabbed up.

On the advice of his many relatives, Stricklin dictated the 52-page volume to Barbara, his grandson's wife during 1970. The leatherette-bound book, complete with old photographs, became a fitting present for the 63rd anniversary of Stricklin and his wife, Sadie, earlier this September.

When the couple moved to California from the Midwest in 1920, only three oil wells existed in Huntington Beach. Stricklin helped build the fourth.

"There wasn't anything here then. Huntington Beach was just a small place without paved streets or lights," he noted in his book. "Their streets were just oil roads — they'd grade up a street and put oil on it."

At the time the city had only one policeman, Jack Tinsley, who also acted as fire chief and city inspector. If anyone wanted to get anything done, Tinsley was the man to ask.

Even though the roads were rough, Stricklin and his wife braved potholes and ruts to go to Long Beach where they listened to one of the first radios.

"They were advertising the radio down at the Pike. There was a long table where they had four crystal sets and you

Highway and on the ocean side of the PE tracks," claims the former oil man.

"The heat expanded the rail and buckled it so it rose as much as three feet above the ground. It took us pretty near a week before we got that one stopped."

After the depression years Stricklin acquired some land on which he started one of his sons in the bean farming business. Digging for a drainage ditch he uncovered two Indian skeletons.

That find, however, compared only mildly to a mass grave on Slater Avenue which was broken open by another farmer during the 1920's, according to Stricklin.

Stricklin took some of his

men to the grave and helped the farmer uncover 36 skeletons whose origin remain a mystery to him.

"There were that many in an area about 40 feet square. Some of them were actually sitting up, others were stooped over and some were lying down flat," he wrote.

"We didn't take them out. We'd uncover them and get all the dirt away from them and just leave them sitting there. It was a gruesome sight. Nobody knows whether it was a massacre or whether they had died and were put there, or whether they drowned in a flood. We called the people from the state and they put them in a museum somewhere."

"They were advertising the radio down at the Pike. There was a long table where they had four crystal sets and you could listen to the radio for five or 10 minutes for a quarter," he remembers.

"We also had one of the first televisions. It had a little 10-inch screen and people came from all around our house to see that television," added Stricklin, who now lives at 17232 Golden West St.

During the oil boom of the mid-20's Stricklin continued his employment as rig builder for Standard Oil, only at an accelerated pace.

"People came pouring in here like there was a gold rush. We really got busy then. We used to work in the oil fields every day. We didn't know what a day off or a vacation was," he wrote.

One of his major projects was the construction of a half-mile long concrete sea wall along the bluffs area. It still exists today, protecting pumping equipment from erosion by water.

Blowouts and oil fires complicated the oil recovery process and whenever there was a disaster, Stricklin was usually in the midst of the rough going.

"There is a vegetable gas in this area about 1,800 feet down. When they drilled down that for they would hit these gas pockets and it would blow out," he recalled. "It would blow the rig down and cut the timbers all up. I've seen rocks bigger than your fist fly up in the air and cut the timbers all up."

"We had water and pumps of our own in the fields to fight fires. We would hook up a hose to a pump and the fire department did what it could, but it just wasn't equipped to handle them."

One fire during the 1930's was so severe that it disrupted passenger service on the Pacific Electric Railway, according to Stricklin. "The fire got so hot that it melted the pavement on Pacific Coast