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WEEKEND BREAK

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Ever-optimistic oilmen hit dry holes in Pacific Northwest

Companies spend fortunes sinking ludicrously expensive holes on educated guesswork

By **MATT WINTERS**
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Petroleum geology is anything but straightforward. The earth is so ancient — and has so often flopped over on itself, weathered down, thrust up, broken apart, erupted, iced over — that finding where petroleum is trapped can seem like a three-way marriage between advanced science, black magic and dumb luck.

Even so, the financial rewards are so fantastical, companies spend fortunes sinking ludicrously expensive holes based on educated guesswork. In 2015, for example, Royal Dutch Shell abandoned a disappointing \$8 billion quest for crude in the U.S. Arctic.

The association of oil with areas where carbon-rich sediments have settled for ages is strong enough that it makes sense to sink exploratory wells wherever rivers join oceans. Look around the world and you'll find ample examples near the mouths of great rivers where oil is found in abundance. The Gulf of Mexico, into which the Mississippi has flowed for eons, brims with oil. The Niger River Delta in West Africa is one giant pincushion and refinery.

So you'd think someone would take a chance and plop down some oil-exploration money around the Columbia River estuary. And you'd be right — they have, more than once. As you can tell from the absence of derricks, pumps and pipelines, they weren't a success.

Long Beach Oil

Retired businessman David Aase told me a few weeks ago of how exciting it was for him and high school classmates when an oil rig set up operations near the shoreline in Long Beach, Washington, in June 1953.

Long Beach Oil Co. erected a 132-foot steel drilling tower on what was then an undeveloped part of South 10th Street — now Sid Snyder Avenue. To place this in a modern context, it likely would have been near the World Kite Museum.

Derrick-men from Vernal, Utah, and Casper, Wyoming, operated the rig, while three Washington rough-necks ran the drilling equipment. (Roughneck started as a term for 19th century traveling carnival workers but was transferred to drillers by the 1930s in recognition of their tough, dirty, transient work.)

"Local folks were quite amused this week watching workers trot here and there, high above the earth, while erecting the derrick tower," the *Chinook Observer* reported June 26, 1953.

Excitement grew, as by July 17 the well reached 1,915 feet "and still going through shale and sandy deposits which look mighty favorable toward a strike. Light showings of oil were evident for some 600 feet of drilling We are definitely 'over the trap,' and so long as the earth's formation continues as favorable as present, we shall keep drilling to 6,500 feet," the company president said.

But they pulled the pipe out upon reaching 2,103 feet — 4/10ths of a mile — at a cost of \$70,000, after tests punctured their high spirits. The firm first intended to move north up the beach a couple of miles and try again, but by August, the show was packed up and hit the road for parts unknown.

The Astoria shale

This was by no means the first effort to find oil in our vicinity. A 1914 report by the U.S. Geological Survey found, "A few attempts to obtain oil have been made, eight wells having been drilled in northwestern Oregon, all of which are dry, but one of which, near Dallas,

yielded a small flow of gas." However, the USGS said, these wells weren't based on valid geology and did not "afford a fair test of the ground."

A geological formation on both sides of the Columbia estuary — the Astoria shale — contains many marine fossil species, which might be seen as a potential indicator of oil. But the USGS noted: "Sandstone dikes are very abundant. Probably not less than a hundred may be seen in Astoria One would think, therefore, that if much free oil had ever existed in the shale or underlying sandstone it would have escaped through the sandstone dikes, (which) is adverse to the belief that there are underground oil reservoirs in the Astoria region."

This didn't discourage efforts to find oil. Besides the 1953 drilling in Long Beach, accounts also exist of oil exploration at McGowan, Washington, just opposite Astoria, in 1928-30. Local historian Joan Mann reported in a 1994 *Sou'wester* article that Union Oil Co. of California reached a depth of 500 feet in March 1929, "plagued with breaking lines and bits as it forced through hard volcanic rock." Work reached 3,800 feet in June 1930, finding natural gas and traces of oil. The effort ceased at 4,300 feet and a cost of \$200,000. After inflation, this would amount to something like \$2.8 million today.

So why isn't there much oil here? I took my last college geology course in about 1979, then switched to studying oil and gas law, before deciding being a small-town newspaperman was much more entertaining — even if also less lucrative. But I feel safe in hypothesizing that violent earthquakes at this intersection of crustal plates are unfavorable for forming and retaining petroleum. Could be, too, that the Columbia's carbon-rich sediments are carried far off into the deep ocean hereabouts, where the continental shelf drops steeply into the Pacific. Maybe some future technology will exploit oil out in the deep blue sea, but hopefully only after we've learned how to do so without endangering the global climate and our nearby environment.

Local heroes

Geologists and others involved in oil, gas and mineral development were among my childhood heroes. Dad's geologist friend Walt Roberts was an endlessly fascinating fount of firsthand stories about battling giant anacondas in the trackless Columbian swamps, while Mom's cousin Wally Bell graduated from the famous Colorado School of Mines before gallivanting around Venezuela for years back when it was a functioning country on an upward trajectory.

Though our families were in distinctly different political camps, another geologist who made a powerful impression on me was John Wold, Wyoming's former congressman, who died last month at 100. A tribute by one of his friends made me smile — "probably the most hands-on, enthusiastic, optimistic explorer of things to do with energy." You couldn't meet Wold without a bit of his sparkling and friendly attitude rubbing off. He was endlessly generous with his time, attention and money.

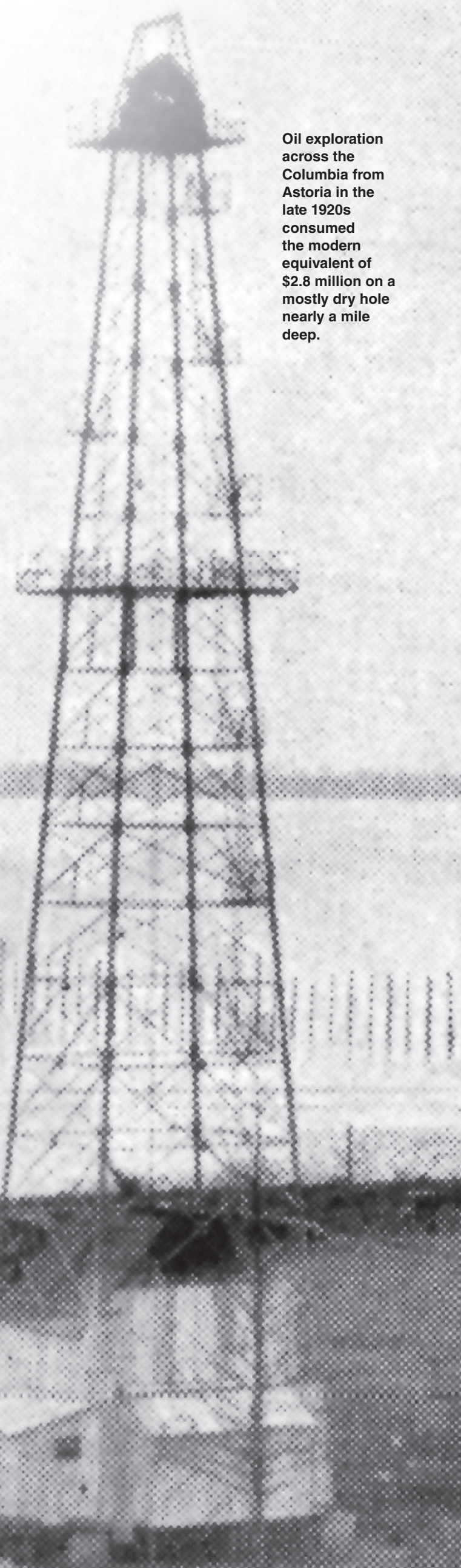
One of my favorite fictional oilmen was portrayed by Burt Lancaster in the 1983 movie "Local Hero." (Peter Capaldi, the current Doctor Who on BBC, also has an important supporting role in the film.) Although more curmudgeonly than most of the ever-hopeful geologists I've gotten to know, Lancaster's character Felix Happer in some ways epitomizes the profession's "get it done" drive. This isn't an approach that dovetails well with the modern regulatory framework, but it is an American archetype, one we can still celebrate.

I'm glad oil exploration didn't succeed here — this place might be unrecognizable. But we ought to be mindful of the ever-hopeful men who chased their dreams down expensive boreholes around our beautiful estuary. Dreams, even some we don't share, are more precious than oil.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal.



File Photos
 A front page of the *Chinook Observer* from nearly 64 years ago reports one of the final attempts to find oil near the mouth of the Columbia River.



Oil exploration across the Columbia from Astoria in the late 1920s consumed the modern equivalent of \$2.8 million on a mostly dry hole nearly a mile deep.