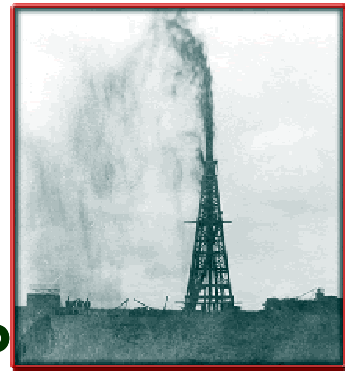


GUSHER AT SPINDLETOP



The story of the first great Texas oil well, which ushered in a new century and a new age, as remembered by participants

By WILLIAM A. OWENS

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Texas, as everyone knows, is synonymous with oil. But how many know, at least in any detail, the story of the fabulous strike which ushered in the age of the Lone Star billionaire?

The history of Texas oil really begins on a dramatic morning in January, 1901, when the Lucas gusher, afterward world-famous as Spindletop, was brought in near Beaumont. (The name Spindletop is said to be derived from a tree in the vicinity shaped like an inverted cone.)

Beaumont in January of 1901 was an obscure and unpromising lumber and rice market. But then the Lucas gusher was brought in, four miles south of the town, and overnight Beaumont became a mecca. Adventurers flocked from far and near. Every Texan began to dream of a fortune under his ranch, farm, or town lot; and many of the dreams came true: within two years Texas' oil production increased, twentyfold.

The remarkable narrative which appears here was obtained by Dr. William A. Owens, novelist and scholar in English literature, who took to Texas the methods of the Columbia University Oral History Project. It is the first account of Spindletop to be derived direct from the lips of the three observers best qualified to tell it: Pattillo Higgins, since dead, who had faith that oil was to be found at Spindletop, but whose money ran out before he could prove it: and the Hamill

brothers, Curt and Al (also now dead), who were at work on the drill the day a 160-foot geyser of oil suddenly leaped into the Texas sky.

Tuesday, January 1, 1901. First day of the first year of a new century.

Early in the morning three men in a buckboard were driving slowly across the Texas coastal plain south of Beaumont. Their destination was a prairie mound called Spindletop, where a rough wood derrick rose above the marsh grass. They were intent on the job ahead of them only as a job. Not one of them imagined the impact it would have on the new century.

The men were Allen W. Hamill, his brother Curt, and Will "Peck" Byrd. They were the entire crew of an outfit engaged to drill an oil well at Spindletop, the well that turned out to be the first gusher in American oil history.

Al Hamill, 24, tall and slender, was a partner with his brother Jim in the Hamill Brothers Contracting Company. Jim Hamill, after getting a start drilling artesian wells at Waco, had moved on to the Corsicana oil field near Dallas, where a small boom had begun after the discovery of oil by two enterprising Pennsylvanians in 1897. There Al joined him; they formed a partnership and offered Curt a job as tool dresser. Curt, four years older than Al, was heavier of build, with the strength of an ox and the tenacity of a bulldog. For the well at Spindletop they hired Peck Byrd as fireman and man of all work. They had begun drilling in October, but so far they had failed to strike oil.

Now, on New Year's Day, the three of them bounced along the muddy track toward a well that seemed unlikely to pay the cost of drilling. They had shut down on December 24 so Al and Curt could spend Christmas in Corsicana. On their return, Curt had brought his wife and family and settled them in a shack not far from the well. Al and Peck boarded with them.

They came to the fence that marked Perry McFaddin's tract, opened a gate, and drove through. McFaddin, having little faith in the prospect for oil, was planning to turn the tract into a large rice farm; beyond the derrick, within hollering distance, he had six carpenters at work building a rice barn.

The men came to the derrick, which jutted up from a wide expanse of gray prairie toward a wider expanse of gray sky. Al stopped the horses and ran his eyes over

the derrick, bull wheel, and boiler. Everything seemed to be in order, ready for them to get on with the job. Al, who was in charge, had contracted to drill down to 1,200 feet, when he would receive payment in full, \$2,400. For Curt and Peck, the job represented a living—\$80 a month and lodging.

Al was eager to get started.

“Peck, fire her up. Curt, check the derrick.”

Peck filled the boiler from a water well and fired it with pine slabs. Curt climbed to the double board, forty feet up, and checked the pulleys and ropes of the draw works. From the floor of the derrick to the crown block—the pulley and rope which moved the bit up and down—the rig was ready to go.

With a heavy wrench Al tightened the ring clamps that fastened the rotary drill to the drill pipe and inspected the fishtail bit. With luck it would hold out for another day or two of drilling. Then, standing at the driller’s place on the derrick floor, he got a signal from Peck, who had built up a head of steam. Al looked up at Curt, above him on the derrick.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Al kicked in the clutch that set the rotary to its auger-like grinding and they settled down to the task.

Theirs was not the first attempt to find oil at Spindletop. For ten years Pattillo Higgins, a local man, had tried to harness the natural gas that bubbled in the five sour mineral wells at Spindletop. Managing, after some difficulty, to obtain backing, Higgins proceeded to lay out a part of the prairie in a real-estate development, which he called Gladys City, and to bring a succession of drillers to Spindletop. As well after well Tailed, he almost laughed him out of town. At this point Higgins brought in Captain A. F. Lucas, an Austrian mining engineer who had been prospecting for sulphur in Louisiana. Lucas drilled another well. It was a failure, but he did manage to extract some crude oil—enough to fill a small vial—and took it east in search of more financial backing. (His capital exhausted, Higgins had been forced to drop out, though he still owned land at Spindletop.)

In Pittsburgh Lucas interested J. M. Guffey and John H. Galey, both experienced in the oil fields of Pennsylvania. In September, 1900, Lucas was back in Texas, at Corsicana; it was he who had contracted with the Hamill brothers to drill the test well at Spindletop.

The Hamills had arrived in Beaumont with their drilling equipment about October 1. Lucas had met them and taken them to the location, where they saw a six-inch pipe extending above ground—all that remained of the earlier attempts to find oil. Lucas lighted a match and dropped it into the pipe. There was a puff. A flame shot up and died away.

Convinced of the presence of natural gas, the Hamills hauled their rotary drill and boiler to Spindletop. With their own hands they unloaded a carload of pipe, hauled it to the location, and stacked it on a crude pipe rack.

In Corsicana there had been derrick builders, but here in Beaumont they could not find one. There was not even a carpenter who would undertake the job.

There was nothing to do but build it themselves. They trampled down marsh grass that grew high as fences, stirring up swarms of mosquitoes that made life almost unbearable. The timber was green, wet, unsized, and would not fit the derrick pattern they had brought with them. In a kind of desperation they laid the timber out on the ground and made a new-pattern, much as a woman cuts out a pattern for an apron.

After ten days they had a derrick 84 feet high, rough in appearance but strong and sturdy. In it they installed their Chapman rotary drill. Then they dug a slush pit sixteen by thirty by three feet and lined it with red Beaumont clay. Finally they began digging a water well to supply the boiler; twenty feet down they struck a good flow of water that bubbled with gas.

On an October morning they started drilling, using a twelve-inch bit. As the bit dug down, they forced water into the hole, and the fishtails worked up a sludge that was pumped out into the slush pit. As they bore downward, they hit, successively, formations of water sand, hard sand, and gumbo; having no geologist to advise them, they had to experiment to get through each one. The

work was time-consuming; more than six weeks had passed and they were far behind schedule.

But finally they got through them all. Then, at something over 600 feet, gas suddenly blew water out of the hole and damaged the drill. Sharp sand shot out as if from a blast furnace, damaging the machinery. The men waited while the gas blew itself out; then they repaired the rig and began drilling again.

Worried that another blowout might destroy their equipment, they decided to keep the rotary and pump going day and night. That meant going on eighteen-hour "towers" (as oil men called tours of duty).

One night about midnight Al came on to find that Peck had made hardly any headway at all. He took over and thumped along until about three in the morning, when the rotary began to turn with ease. Daylight showed oil in bubbles in iridescent slicks on the slush pit.

When Curt came, Al showed him the oil and sent him for Captain Lucas. Lucas smelled and tasted the oil and then wired for John Galey. He was convinced the well was ready to be brought in and wanted Galey to share the excitement.

When Galey finally arrived he examined the oil on the slush pit.

"You might bail it," he told Al.

They put on a bailer made of perforated pipe wrapped in a bed sheet, a device that strained out sand and mud. The sample they brought up showed a little flow of oil.

"Try it again," Galey ordered.

When they went in again, the pipe stopped 300 feet from the bottom. They tried several times but could get no deeper.

Galey soon saw there was no use trying to bring the well in at that depth. He had them rig up a string of two-inch pipe and wash the bottom of the well out with clean water.

It was near Christmas time. Anyone could see that the men were near exhaustion.

“I’ll tell you what to do,” Galey told them. “You try to pull that pipe. Can’t do anything with it the way it is. Set the six-inch through that and go down and see if there’s anything below. When you get that done, shut down for Christmas.”

They followed Galey’s orders and on December 24 set the six-inch to a depth of 920 feet.

That is how the drilling operation stood when they returned on the morning of January 1, 1901.

All of New Year’s Day Al held the lever of the rotary and watched the slowly turning drill pipe sink into the earth. Again they were on eightcen-hour towers, constantly lacing the danger of a gas blowout. At 1,020 feet Al hit a crevice, or what he took to be a crevice, in the rock. If he turned the bit in one direction, it would go down five or six inches farther than if he turned it in the other. If he turned it a quarter revolution more, it would start to back up. Baffled, he called Curt and Peck.

When they were unable to make headway, they decided to pull pipe. It was discouraging work, pulling up twenty-loot lengths at a time when they should be going steadily toward their 1,200-foot depth. They found the fishtail bit dull from battering rock. They sharpened it and went in again.

Another night of keeping the boiler going and the rotary turning. Still the rock would not give way. Another day of drilling with no progress. All their bits were worn down to nubbins. Finally, on the morning of January 10, Al brought a new bit from Beaumont and they put it on.

Suddenly, at about 700 feet, mud commenced boiling up through the rotary. It got higher and higher. Then the drill pipe began rising—something they had never seen before. It moved up and started going through the top of the derrick.

Al and Peck yelled to Curt and ran. Curt scrambled down from the derrick, covered with slimy mud. From a safe distance they watched as the pipe kept on rising. It took the elevators and traveling block off and then knocked off the crown block. Fascinated, they watched pipe break in sections of three or four lengths and fall like crumbled macaroni. It knocked down the smoke-stack of the boiler

and curled on the ground around the derrick. The last length of pipe was followed by rocks, and then by a deafening roar of gas.

McFaddin's carpenters scrambled like monkeys from the nearby barn and raced on horseback toward Beaumont.

The roar died down gradually and within a few minutes all was quiet. Peck and the Hamill brothers crept back to find a discouraging mess: engine and boiler seemed ruined; mud stood six inches deep on the derrick floor. They could see no signs of oil.

Al picked up a shovel.

"Let's get some of this off the floor," he said.

Of a sudden, a chunk of mud shot out of the six-inch hole with an explosion like a cannon. Then a stream of mud blew up, with a little blue gas following it. Again the men ran.

Then it quieted down and ceased altogether. The crew looked at each other wonderingly. Again they inched forward till they stood on the derrick floor in the mud. Al walked over and peered down the hole. They could hear a kind of bubbling deep in the earth. Then they could see frothy oil starting up. The well seemed to be breathing: oil was coming up and settling back with the gas pressure; with each breath it came a little higher.

When it poured out over the derrick floor they moved back. With each pulsation the flow went a little higher and a little higher and a little higher. Finally the momentum was so great that oil shot through the top of the derrick. With it came rocks and sand and shale from the conglomerate formation they had drilled into. It spurted skyward in a stream over 160 feet high—at least twice the height of the derrick. Once the oil was in full flow, there seemed to be no lessening.

After a few minutes, when their excitement had subsided somewhat, they crept closer, getting soaked with a spray of black oil. Their excitement changed to disgust. The machinery was damaged. Mud flowed all over the derrick floor. Strings of drill pipe lay on the ground, twisted and useless. They saw no way to control the power they had unleashed.

Al shouted for Peck to go for Captain Lucas. Peck drove at a gallop across the prairie to Captain Lucas' house, more than a mile away, only to find that Captain Lucas had gone to Beaumont.

Mrs. Lucas located him at Louis Meyer's Dry Goods Store, where he had set up his headquarters while waiting for something to happen. She had seen the gusher from her door. Quickly she told him what she saw.

Peck got back to the well as fast as he could. Some of McFaddin's carpenters had returned, but they stood far off, watching.

In a short time they saw Captain Lucas come over the hill in his buckboard, his horse at a dead run. At the gate, the horse stopped short, pitching Lucas to the ground. He landed on his feet and came running—panting, out of breath.

"Al, Al," he called, his Austrian accent more pronounced in his excitement. "What is it? What is it?"

"Why, it's oil, Captain. Oil!"

Captain Lucas grabbed Al and hugged him.

"Thank God, thank God," he cried. Then he hugged Curt and Peck.

Within an hour people began to arrive from Beaumont—in buggies, on horseback, on foot—attracted by the rumors spreading from Louis Meyer's store and by the roar of the gusher, which could be heard as far as Beaumont and beyond. They came as near as the fence, about 150 feet from the well, and watched in fear and astonishment. Every time the wind shifted, a spray of oil drove them back.

Lucas, when he had regained his composure, hurried to Beaumont and wired John Galey to come at once.

The effect of oil was already beginning to be felt in Beaumont. Oil spray drifted in on the Gulf breeze. Sulphur gas filled the air. People held their noses against it. They watched it tarnish their white houses with black and orange stains. They told of Negroes holding prayer meetings, thinking the end of the world had come. Back at Spindletop Captain Lucas, seeing the danger of fire, had Curt sworn in as a deputy sheriff to keep everyone away from the well. Together they drove the curious onlookers back beyond the fence. Lucas hired extra guards, armed them

with shotguns, and stationed them in lines on the east and west. To the south, marsh grass stretched unbroken.

“Keep the people back and don’t let them smoke,” Captain Lucas told Curt.

“Don’t let anybody smoke.”

At sunup the curious again lined the fence. Pattillo Higgins rode his horse close and sat watching the fulfillment of his dream. Though he no longer held stock in the Gladys City Oil, Gas and Manufacturing Company, he had valuable land near the well, more than enough to establish him in the oil business.

About ten that morning the well blew wild again, with a mighty roar of gas that heaved rocks high into the air. Those who had come to watch were rewarded. After the well had cleaned itself of rocks and shale, it settled down to a steady flow that spouted above the top of the derrick.

There being no tankage in the Beaumont area, they had to let the oil bubble out on the ground. Captain Lucas had some levees thrown up to contain it until he could get cypress tanks built. The railroad men protected their tracks with an embankment. Oil flowed over fields intended for rice farms and collected in a draw near the railroad.

During the day Jim Hamill arrived from Corsicana, and, for the first time since the well blew in, Curt and Peck went home to clean up. They took off their oil-soaked clothes and rubbed their bodies dry with gunny sacks. Then they scrubbed off the remaining oil with lye soap and water as hot as they could stand it.

Sunday morning broke clear and cold. A heavy frost coated the crass. Curt and Peck were on duty. Al having gone home to sleep. By midmorning some five or six hundred people were milling about in the pasture. Curt and Peck, in their slicker suits, took turns working around the well and keeping people away.

Then they saw a man come riding on horseback across the pasture, with a Negro boy mounted behind him. Just when they reached the oily area the boy lighted a pipe and dropped the match into the grass. Flames burst up and black smoke began to rise. A stampede toward Beaumont began, in a wild rush of horses and buggies and running men.

Curt went running toward the fire, with Peck close behind. They took off their slicker coats and beat at the flames. When their coats were burned up, they took off their denim jumpers, and then their shirts. Still the fire spread, nearer and nearer the well. Some of the stampeded men returned.

“Bring me some boards,” Curt shouted.

The men brought boards from McFaddin’s barn, fifty or more of them. Curt and Peck threw them on the line of flame nearest the well. Gradually they brought the fire under control, but not until more than an acre of grass had burned over.

By the time Al arrived, alerted by the smoke, the fire was out. He looked at Curt and Peck. They were out of breath and their faces were black with oil smoke. Al looked at the blackened patch.

“If it had ever got to the well,” he said, “I don’t know what we’d have done with it.”

This fire put fear into them: the well had to be shut off. But how? Great pressure was needed to cap the well; it had to be supplied by human muscle, and the work was perilous because a single spark might trigger a tremendous explosion.

Stories of the wild well had appeared in newspapers across the country.

Telegrams began to arrive from as far away as San Francisco, with offers to shut off the well. Estimates for the job ranged up to \$10,000. A man who claimed to be a hydraulic engineer appeared at Spindletop with a telegram from John Galey, authorizing him to shut off the well. He studied the gushing oil and then turned to Al and said, “You can certainly have the job if you want it. I wouldn’t shut it off if they gave me the well, lease, and everything belonging to it. It’s too dangerous.”

Galey himself arrived soon afterward, and Al took him to the well. Elated, Galey estimated the flow to be between 80,000 and 100,000 barrels a day. Ruefully they looked at the wasted oil which had run over the flat land and been washed down the bayou by heavy rains. They talked immediately about capping the well. Galey turned to Jim and said, “Well, you boys drilled the well. What do you think about shutting it in?”

“Well, Mr. Galey, I think we can do it.”

“All right, go to it.”

All that night the Hamill brothers and Captain Lucas worked on plans for capping the well. Early next morning Jim arranged for heavy timbers and clamps to be delivered. Al swiped two steel rails from the Southern Pacific Railroad.

During the drilling they had put a collar on the ten-inch pipe to protect the threads when they set the eight-inch pipe inside. While driving the pipe through the first sand the collar had become welded to the pipe. It had to be cut off and the threads re-dressed before the shutoff could be started.

Al, the only one of the three Hamills who was unmarried, volunteered to cut the protector off. He went to Beaumont and got a pair of goggles, the kind he had used on the farm when threshing grain. These he taped to his face to keep oil and gas out of his eyes. Then he went in with a hacksaw and diamond points. He straddled the pipe all afternoon, working away carefully and patiently, with oil raining down on him and running off his slicker suit and hat.

J. S. Cullinan, later a founder of the Texas Company and considered the father of the Texas oil industry, had arrived a few days before, and now he and Jim Hamill stood watching.

"Now, Jim," Cullinan warned, "you watch that kid. He's in great danger. If he hits a spark there, why, he just—it'd be impossible to get him out."

The men stood close, ready to pull Al out in case of fire or in case he should be overcome by gas. As fatigue set in, he had to come out for air, some work intervals lasting only two or three minutes; but finally he succeeded in cutting the collar in two and springing it enough to get it off. Then, in spite of the rain of oil, he dressed the threads perfectly.

When the pipe was ready, they took the floor boards off. Then they buried two four-by-twelve timbers and bolted them to the legs of the derrick. They bolted the steel rails to the timbers. Then they built a carriage arrangement and bolted it to the rails. With the fittings, the valves and the "T," and the connections, it looked like a crate. It was actually the beginning of what was later called the "Christmas tree," a set of pipes and valves for reducing internal pressure in a well. All parts were solidly bolted to the derrick; if the carriage were dislodged by the pressure, the whole derrick would go.

Their equipment was ready, but the well was still throwing rocks—rocks that went up as high as a man could see and then came down in a spray of oil and sand. “We’d better not shut that in today,” Jim said. “One of those rocks might damage our valve—might knock it off.”

Again they settled down to fearful watching and waiting. A spark might set it off, the well would be lost, and there would be little hope of escape for three oil-soaked men.

On January 20 they watched as they had watched every day. In the middle of the morning Jim came out.

“Well, boys,” he asked, “how’s it been acting?”

“No rocks this morning,” they assured him.

He watched with them until after eleven.

“Well, let’s shut her in,” he said.

The brothers looked at each other. The most dangerous moment had arrived. Al was the first to speak.

“Curt, I’ll work the carriage. You turn the valve there, will you?”

With chain tongs Al pulled the unwieldy carriage until the valve was directly over the pipe. Then Curt rushed in, lowered the valve over the pipe, and screwed it tight. One moment there was a hissing roar—the next, silence. The well was shut off. But Curt had fallen to the ground, overcome by gas. They dragged him to fresh air and revived him.

The flow finally stopped. They pounded rope between the six-inch and eight-inch pipes, poured cement in over the rope, and finally covered the valve with a mound of dirt, to protect the well from fire.

It was fortunate they did. A few days later a spark from a locomotive set fire to the lake of oil that stretched between the well and the railroad tracks, three-fourths of a mile away. This time there was no chance to fight the fire. The flames leapt fast; the smoke was overpowering. Men worked feverishly to drag their equipment out of the path.

The fire started about noon. By middle of the afternoon it was burning along the entire side of the lake bounded by the tracks. If the wind changed, flames would sweep across the whole of Spindletop.

A man on horseback (some said it was McFaddin trying to save his pasture) set fire to the other side of the lake. Smoke boiled up and shut out the sun. The two walls of flame rushed toward each other. When they were close, with only a deep alley between, explosions began to shake the earth. The walls would meet, throw sheets of oil into the air, and then recede under the impact of explosions that shook Beaumont, four miles away.

Smoke rolled over the city and turned day into night. Then a rain storm came and washed soot down upon the town. Houses stained orange before were now turned black. Again people, frightened by this great unknown force, held prayer meetings and prepared themselves for the end of time.

But the fire passed, and the well was safe. Its stored-up power became both the symbol and the incentive of a new century.

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