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ABSTRACTS

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**THE PENNSYLVANIA GRADE CRUDE OIL
ASSOCIATION'S EARLY YEARS, 1923-40**

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The Pennsylvania Grade Crude Oil Association (PGCOA) was founded in 1923 as a trade association of producers, refiners and jobbers. At the time of its birth, Pennsylvania's Oil Region was stuck in a decline dating back to the end of the previous century. Production had declined, many refiners had discontinued operations, and marketing was under the control of the successors to the Standard Oil monopoly, dissolved by order of the United States Supreme Court in 1911.

In the late 19th century, the center of the nation's oil production had begun shifting west to the Lima fields in Ohio, then to California, the Mid-Continent, and in the first year of the 20th century to the Gulf Coast. Beyond the U.S., oil production emerged in Russia (especially around the Baku region), the Netherlands East Indies, and the Caribbean basin. Moreover, intriguing possibilities emerged in the so-called Near East. The Great War (1914-18) consumed massive amounts of petroleum, as belligerents shifted from animal power to internal combustion engines, and new naval vessels used oil instead of coal. The conflict also raised fears of a coming oil famine. Observers cited the production decline in Pennsylvania as the precursor for all of the world's petroleum industry. Discoveries, however, of new fields in the Mid Continent and in Persia and Arabia pushed some of these fears to the side.

But the nation's original Oil Region was mired in a slump. Founders of the PGCOA aimed to mitigate its effects by joining together to promote the characteristics of the local petroleum. This paper examines the little-known story of how this organization succeeded in its goal in its first decades. Based largely on papers deposited at the Drake Well Museum Archives at Titusville, Pennsylvania, in addition to material published by Pennsylvania State College, state and national government agencies, and secondary sources, it traces the steps taken by the PGCOA. The association built on the reputation of Pennsylvania petroleum as a base for superior lubricants.

As early as the 1860s, Dr. John Ellis, producer of Valvoline Oil, took pains to inform customers that he bought petroleum produced only in Pennsylvania to make his lubricating oil. The PGCOA established a procedure to license dealers of lubricants refined from *100 percent pure Pennsylvania grade oil*. Each dealer was given a permit number which appeared on its cans, along with the PGCOA logo. The board authorized its attorneys to bring legal cases against firms that sold other oils as Pennsylvania products. Eventually, the insignia was registered as a trademark, not only in the United States, but in over a dozen other countries.

The PGCOA also entered into a series of agreements with Pennsylvania State College, and close relationships developed with the School of Mineral Industries, the Department of Petroleum and Natural Gas Engineering at Penn State, as well as various U. S. and Pennsylvania government agencies. The first tested oils to determine their geographic origin, while the second tested the performance of Pennsylvania-grade lubricants.

With the onset of the Great Depression, the PGCOA seemed to decline. About ten years after the oil industry appeared to be on the brink of extinction at the end of the Great War, new oil finds in Texas and Oklahoma further threatened to send oil prices plummeting and destroying the industry. But the programs of the New Deal stabilized the market and the Roosevelt Administration, Congress, and the big oil producing states managed to come to an understanding. Moreover, the activist government of the New Deal era helped the PGCOA and its push against firms that tried to pawn off lubricants made from *inferior Mid-Continent crudes* as Pennsylvania grade crude oil. Finally, the U.S. government seemed to side with smaller producers, refiners, and jobbers against the offspring of the Standard Oil dissolution. The large oil companies had tried to use their branded service stations to drive into oblivion the brands registered by PGCOA, but at the end of the decade, as Europe was, once again, engulfed by war, members of the Pennsylvania Grade Crude Oil Association were holding their own against Big Oil.