

Wednesday, September 30, 2009

Petroleum Club • 800 Bell (downtown)  
Social 11:15 AM, Luncheon 11:30 AM

Cost: \$30 pre-registered members; \$35 for non-members & walk-ups;  
Emeritus/Life/Honorary: \$15; Students: FREE

To guarantee a seat, you must pre-register on the HGS website ([www.hgs.org](http://www.hgs.org))  
and pre-pay with a credit card.

Pre-registration without payment will not be accepted.

You may still walk up and pay at the door, if extra seats are available.

## HGS General Luncheon Meeting

Jeff A. Spencer

Black Pool Energy and the Petroleum  
History Institute\*

# From Brine Wells to Giant Oil Fields: The United States Petroleum Industry of the Nineteenth Century

August 27, 2009 marked the 150th anniversary of the Drake Well in Titusville, Pennsylvania, the “first successful commercial oil well in the United States”. Although “who was first” claims exist from several states, the importance of the Drake Well is the rapid development and financial investment that occurred in the petroleum industry soon after this discovery. The Drake Well also led to other “firsts”. Approximately eight miles from the Drake Well, the first great flowing well in the United States was completed in September 1861. The Empire Well on the Funk Farm initially flowed 3,000 barrels of oil per day. Perhaps the first giant oil field in the United States was discovered in 1871 at Bradford (EUR 700 MMBO), straddling the Pennsylvania-New York state line.

For many years oil had been collected from seeps, hand-dug pits, and brine wells. Over fifty years before the drilling of the famous 1859 Drake Well, the Ruffner brothers operated a salt works near an eastern tributary of the Ohio River in what is now West Virginia. Some of the byproduct oil was collected, though most of the oil was diverted into the Kanawha River giving the river its nickname, “Old Greasy.” Eight years later, oil was discovered, produced, and marketed from wells dug in southeastern Ohio. In 1814, Silas Thorla and Robert McKee operated a salt works in what is now Ohio’s Noble County. They drilled for salt brine using the spring-pole drilling method and a hollow sycamore log as surface casing. The associated oil was initially considered a nuisance, but was later collected, bottled, and sold as a medicine for rheumatism, sprains, and bruises. In 1860, one of the first oil fields in Ohio was discovered approximately ten miles southeast of the Thorla-McKee Well. The discovery of the Macksburg oil field helped ignite an oil boom in southeastern Ohio. Hundreds of wooden derricks sprang up and refineries were built along the Ohio River.

Oil was discovered in northwestern Ohio near the city of Lima in 1885, a year after natural gas was discovered near the town of Findlay. The discovery of the giant Lima-Indiana oil field (EUR 500 MMBO) set off the “oil boom of northwest Ohio”, a period of land speculation and rapid oil field development that lasted over 20 years. As the field was extended to the south, the nation’s

first “over water” wells were drilled in Grand Lake St. Marys, then the largest man-made lake in the world. John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil of Cleveland, soon to monopolize the oil refining industry, built storage tanks, pipelines, and a refinery near Lima. The Lima-Indiana field propelled Ohio into the leading oil-producing state from 1895-1903.

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As production from these early fields declined, oilmen spread out throughout the United States searching for oil. The great 1901 oil gushers of Spindletop, Texas and Jennings, Louisiana ushered in the United States petroleum industry of the twentieth century. ■

*\*The mission of the PETROLEUM HISTORY INSTITUTE is to pursue the history, heritage and development of the modern oil industry from its 1859 inception in Oil Creek Valley,*

*Pennsylvania, to its early roots in other regions in North America and the subsequent spread throughout the world to its current global status ([www.petroleumhistory.org](http://www.petroleumhistory.org)).*

### Biographical Sketch

JEFF SPENCER is a geologist/partner with Black Pool Energy, LP in Houston, Texas. He received a BS in Geology from the University of Cincinnati and a MS in Earth Sciences from the University of New Orleans. Prior to joining Black Pool, he was employed by Samson (2005), Osprey Petroleum (2000-2005), Unocal (1998-2000), and Amoco (1981-1998). Jeff has spent most of his career exploring the Gulf Coast onshore and Gulf of Mexico shelf. He has authored or co-authored several papers on oil field history, with emphasis on the pictorial history of early oil fields and famous oil and gas wells. He is co-author of the book, *Ohio Oil and Gas* and a collector of oil field-related postcards and postal covers. Jeff is an AAPG certified petroleum geologist and a member of HGS, SIPES, NOGS, and OGS (Ohio Geological Society). He currently serves as first vice-president of the Petroleum History Institute.

