

undergoing a mini oil boom. With little to no fanfare, indeed in relative anonymity, the industry has been reborn.

## **TREADWELL WHARF IN THE SUMMERLAND, CALIFORNIA OIL FIELD: THE FIRST SEA WELLS IN PETROLEUM EXPLORATION**

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Literature on the history of petroleum exploration often notes without attribution that Summerland, California was the location of the world's first offshore oil wells. Seldom mentioned is the fact that in the late 1800's at the identical moment in time another group of petroleum explorers were pursuing oil reservoirs past the shoreline and into the sea.

In California, exploration was led by H.L. Williams, a land developer who had purchased 1,050 acres of land in Summerland, south of Santa Barbara, California. Williams originally intended to profit by selling small lots to fellow members of a small sect named Spiritualists. Sales proved difficult and few, buyers too demanding. Under pressure from his mortgage holder and in fear of losing his investment due to dwindling sales and increasing costs, Williams actively pursued discovery of oil wherever it could be found, using the potential for oil discovery to sell lots at higher prices to oil speculators.

In contrast to Williams and his ambitious plans for personal gain and the loose coalition who followed him, was the highly evolved bureaucracy of the government of Czar Nicholai II, Emperor of Russia. It intended to exploit oil in the Caspian Sea, offshore of the Baku field in Azerbaijan. To accomplish its goal, it turned to its principal contractor, the Nobel Brothers.

In 1898, Williams and his fellow leading citizens approved an application by J.B. Treadwell, a railroad engineer, to build the Treadwell wharf at Summerland and to construct on it a series of wells extending out into the Pacific Ocean. There were no governmental regulations of any kind, local, state or federal, to prevent drilling into the sea or to charge the driller a tariff on the oil that was extracted, beyond a single \$101 payment to Santa Barbara County for the right to construct the pier. Treadwell relied upon the Darling Brothers' local machine shop to engineer conduit to prevent these sea wells from flooding. Treadwell was quickly joined by a rush of individuals and small firms, many of them antecedents to today's well known oil companies. In total 412 sea wells were constructed in four years at Summerland, California. Due to the limited nature of the reservoir, production quickly peaked, then declined steadily. During its years of operation, the Summerland field produced an estimated 1.3 million barrels of oil. By contrast, the Caspian field holds an estimated 2 billion barrel reservoir.

This paper reports the history of the Czarist government's project to explore the Caspian Sea at Baku, then reports the unique factors that motivated and made possible the petroleum exploration of the sea at Summerland and the operation, ownership and history of its sea wells.