

Although his oil sands project faced setbacks during the years of the Great Depression, Ball held great hope for the future of the Athabaska oil sands. At the time he was one of only two individuals, supported by private funds, attempting to win petroleum embedded in the deposits by using a hot water separation process. The Province of Alberta, which controlled the mineral resources within the province, had abandoned its experimental oil sands operations in the early 1930s. It was only with the onset of World War II and with it an increased demand for secure sources of petroleum, that Ball's project received the necessary financial support for Abasand's continued operation. However, this support came from the Dominion Government of Canada, not the Government of Alberta. This government support came with a change in management. When Abasand continued to be plagued with a series of setbacks, the project was questioned by Members of Parliament in the House of Commons and highly criticized in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

The plant permanently closed down after a fire destroyed most of it in 1945; however, the groundwork provided by a joint effort of private business and a national government provided a greater understanding of the uniqueness of the oil sands. It was not until 1967, that finally, Ball's vision was realized when yet another company with American roots, Sun Oil of Philadelphia, began producing petroleum from the oil sands. Sun Oil, through its subsidiary, Great Canadian Oil Sands (GCOS, and now called Suncor Energy), would use a hot-water extraction process similar to the McClave Process used successfully at the Abasand plant. This process had been developed in laboratories in Denver, Colorado, during the 1920s and further tested in Toronto during the 1930s. When the McClave Process was finally applied on site, the Abasand plant successfully extracted bitumen and refined it into a marketable product that was sold locally.

Ball had been granted Bituminous Sands Permit No. 1 under the last regulations, related to petroleum and oil sands development, introduced by the Dominion Government of Canada in May of 1930 just months before control of the natural resources within Alberta were turned over to the province. The extraction or separation plant and refinery were located on a small portion of land called the Horse River Reserve near Fort McMurray. This reserve was a small part of the approximate 2,100 acres, or just a small fraction of the total oil sands deposits, along the Athabaska River retained by the Dominion at the time of transfer of resources to Alberta. The reserve was advantageously located close to the end of steel of the Alberta and Great Waterways Railway, but the quality of oil sands proved to be a disadvantage. Very little physical evidence of the historic plant site remains today, although the outcrops of oil sands along the Horse River that seduced the early developers continue to intrigue visitors and scientists.

#### **ABASAND OILS LTD.**

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Max W. Ball, American geologist and businessman, wrote the following words in 1939 in his book *This Fascinating Oil Business: At Abasand, in Alberta, Canada, a plant is now being constructed for mining the famous oil sands of the Athabaska area, often referred to as 'tar sands,' which contain more oil than is known to exist in all the proven fields in the world.*