

## American Oil.

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When one thinks of oil wells, particularly those of the "oil-gusher" type, he usually thinks of Texas, Oklahoma, or the Gulf of Mexico.

Actually, however, the first oil discovered in this country - and maybe the first well of the *gusher* type in the entire world - was in Burkesville, Cumberland County, Kentucky! Here is the incredible story of that discovery.

Burkesville is about an hour's drive Southeast of Glasgow, Kentucky, on Highway 90. The town is situated on the Cumberland River, 12 miles from the Kentucky/Tennessee border. It's a beautiful area, reminding the observer of New England with the rolling hills and tree-lined roads. Burkesville was established on this site (by one Samuel Burkes) in 1798, soon thereafter to become a center of commerce for the area.

The first explorers and settlers of pioneer Kentucky usually brought small quantities of salt with them to season the game they killed and cooked in the wilderness. Salt was very expensive, yet necessary for the pioneer family. It was needed for two functions, to flavor food - making it more tasty and appealing - and, more important, as a preservative to combat degradation and decay.

When their supply of salt ran out, settlers went to the known "licks," nearby salt springs, for re-supply. As the demand for salt by the growing population grew, however, the supply naturally dwindled. Enterprising men turned to drilling shallow wells for natural brine in order to provide the necessary salt.

Martin Beatty, a well driller from Pennsylvania, actually found the first oil in McCreary County Kentucky in 1819 while looking for brine. The hole provided very little of the useless stuff, however, and was soon forgotten.

Later, Colonels Emerson and Stockton ran into the black, sticky annoyance too. They knew nothing about oil, had no idea they would hit oil, indeed they did not *want* to hit oil. They were drilling for the much more valuable commodity, *salt*. In that day and time, with railroads unknown and overland travel very difficult, salt was a necessity of much greater importance. Again the oil discovery was unexciting.

Nevertheless, on March 11, 1829 - on land owned by Lemuel Stockton, on the banks of Little Renox Creek at the edge of Burkesville, Kentucky - oil refused to remain undiscovered. It appeared again with vigor.

On that day, well-driller Beatty bragged to bystanders "Today I'll drill her into salt or else to Hell." When the gusher erupted he apparently thought he'd succeeded in hitting "hell"! As the story goes "he ran off into the hills and didn't come back," quite terrorized by the situation.

The old "American Well" was the first recorded oil well on this continent. The gusher spouted upwards of 50 feet, flooding down into Renox Creek where it flowed on into the Cumberland River. Oil continued gushing for three weeks or longer, an estimated flow of 50,000 barrels. The well was quite a novelty; people came from miles away to see this phenomenon. Black, thick oil covered the Cumberland River from bank to bank for a distance of almost 200 miles. Someone apparently ignited the slick, as Indians in the area told of it burning like a "river of fire" from Burkesville to Celina, Tennessee, for almost a month.

Residents of the area did not know about things like modern oil and fuel, of course, so the well continued to flow unused for many years. Women referred to the liquid as "devils tar" since their ducks and geese became covered with the substance and they could not sell the feathers and the down. Someone eventually discovered that the oil had some value for coating leather and as a fur treatment for their dogs to kill ticks and fleas.

The potential for medicinal purposes was discovered about 1840. Speculators began to bottle the oil for medicine, selling it throughout this country as well as Europe through about 1850 when such interest began to fade - still years before the discovery of its greatest value to mankind.

As one would expect, the Cumberland County area became a center for oil exploration and development. Other wells were drilled with success, such as the Crocus Creek Gusher. Still its use was primarily medicinal.

Many of the original peddlers of this oil remain unknown, however the primary local dealers appear to have been Travue, Reed and Hall of Burkesville. These three men advertised extensively, having bottles blown with *American Oil* embossed on the glass. The oil sold for 50 cents per pint. The label states that this "celebrated oil" would

cure colic, rheumatism, phthisic, chronic diseases, burns, scalds, fresh cuts, old sores, scald head and sprains in the human body. It was also perfect for botts, colic, sore backs, scratches, splints, strains and fresh wounds in horses.

Job Moses of Buffalo, Rochester and Auburn, New York, visited the area in 1848 and purchased the oil property. He deepened the well from 171' to 400' and set up a pumping rig. Mr. Moses successfully sold large quantities of the pint bottles worldwide, advertised as "American Rock Oil." Within a few years he retired back to New York, a wealthy man. He continued to bottle and sell the product for nearly 20 years.

The original well was eventually plugged with red elm rails, chips and flax seeds because of a disagreement between the owner and those who bottled the oil for him. Today you can find the approximate location marked by a state historical marker 210 feet across Renox Creek on highway 61 North, Burkesville, Kentucky.

This marker was erected in 1934 by the "Kentucky General Assembly". It states: "*Old American Oil Well*" - site of early American gusher that covered Cumberland River with oil and created spectacular "river of fire" March 1829. Oil bottled from this well was widely sold for medicinal use in United States and Europe under trade name "American Oil". The claims of the superior qualities of this oil merited it the name of Old American Oil Well. Original boring was for salt well.

To Kentucky historians as well as the modern petroleum industry this was an extremely significant event. For those who study and preserve history through the research and collecting of early bottles, there are examples to be found which commemorate this historical period. Although elusive, there have been three types of bottle embossed *American Oil* found by collectors. Recently a forth type has been reported... Who knows what remains to be found?

#### **Credits:**

Thanks to the Burkesville Historical Society, the Kentucky Historical Society and Museum, Frankfort, Kentucky.

#### **Books used in the preparation of this story:**

Awakening of Cumberland County by Ernest Lawson.

History of Cumberland County by J.W. Wells.

First American Gusher by Willard R. Jillson.



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For information on the **Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors** please write to Treasurer Kevin Sives, 1485 Buck Hill Drive, Southampton, PA 18966. <http://www.fohbc.com>

**A nice example of the American Oil bottle:** Aqua, pontil base, 6½" x 3" x 1 7/16", rolled lip, embossed on front American Oil, side, Kentucky opposite edge with embossing over shoulder -- Cumberland River, very rare.