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THE LEFTOVERS

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El Sobrante's "Tar Ranch" There's oil in them thar hills...Black Gold...Texas Tea.
Roxanne Miravalle



Many of the early explorers of America encountered petroleum deposits in some form. They noted oil slicks off the coast of California in the sixteenth century. Contra Costa County was one of the first counties in California in which petroleum was discovered, its presence being known as far back as 1864, when prospect wells were drilled 1-1/2 miles south of the Empire coal mine at the foot of Mount Diablo. During that era, it was said that oil had been known to exist in that vicinity, and of a better grade than that produced in the southern part of the state. If there were signs of oil seepage on a ranch, it was naturally assumed there was oil to be found there, and in large quantities. Local farmers and ranchers, on the other hand, knew the value of petroleum for themselves and would gather buckets of the thick, tarry product and use the oozing sludge to pack and soften the hoofs of their horses during prolonged dry seasons.

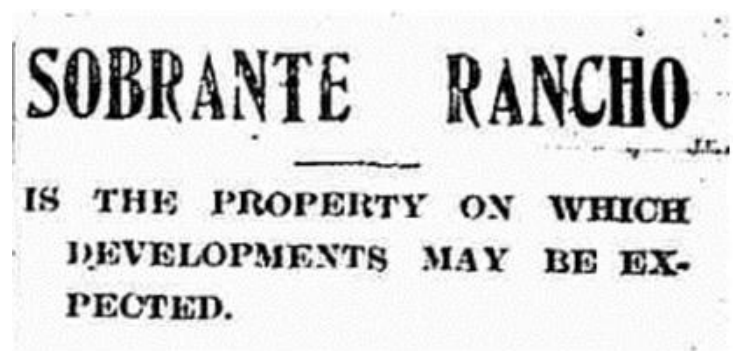
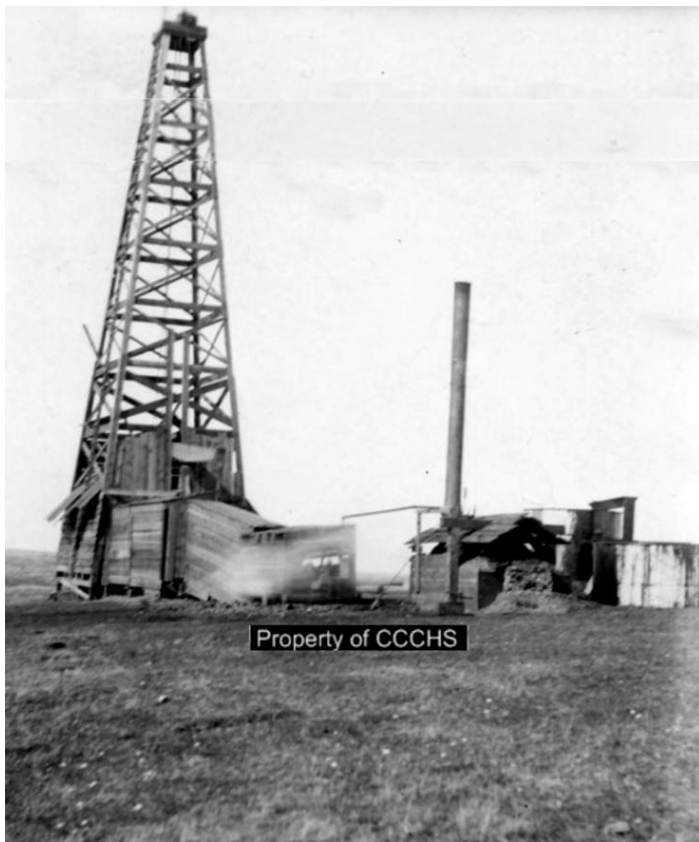
Several different oil companies were formed in an effort to gain access to the valuable "black gold" of the Contra Costa. Advertising from various oil companies littered the newspapers in hopes of winning investors to line their pockets with coin. In the year 1900 alone, the vast list of oil companies included, the American Oil and Refinery Company; Contra Costa Oil and Development Company; Grand Pacific Oil Company, Point Richmond Oil Company, San Pablo Oil Company, Tidewater Oil and Development Company, Golden West Oil Company, Mount Diablo Oil Company, and last, but by no means least, the Sobrante Oil and Investment Company, just to name a few.¹

¹ The information contained in this section is derived largely from reports by W.L. Watts in Thirteenth Rept. California State Mineralogist, 1896, pp. 570-571, and Bulletin No. 19, California State Mining Bureau, 1900, pp. 150-157.
<https://pubs.usgs.gov/bul/0340f/report.pdf>

C. N. Harris, (Charles North; 1840-1902) was president of the Sobrante Oil and Investment Company. Charles, an attorney, hailed from New York and was registered as an officer with the U. S. Land office (which later became the Bureau of Land Management [BLM]). He was also an elected judge for the state of Nevada during his residency there. Harris secured 700 acres of land in the Castro tract, on Sobrante rancho to be used as a well-site. The San Francisco Chronicle reported in a 1901 article, "The land is in San Pablo valley, and the indications common to the country--shale, sand rock and small gas seepages--are found thereon." He installed some wells on the site but had no production. It was later abandoned.

Daniel P. Foley, president of the Golden West Oil Company, controlled 100 acres on the Clancy tract near the Sobrante Company, and put in a rig on the property. On this tract were exposures of shale, and a spring that had indications of gas and oil upon it [SF Chronicle_28 Apr 1901]. Unfortunately, most of the attempts to drill for oil were fruitless and the wells later abandoned.

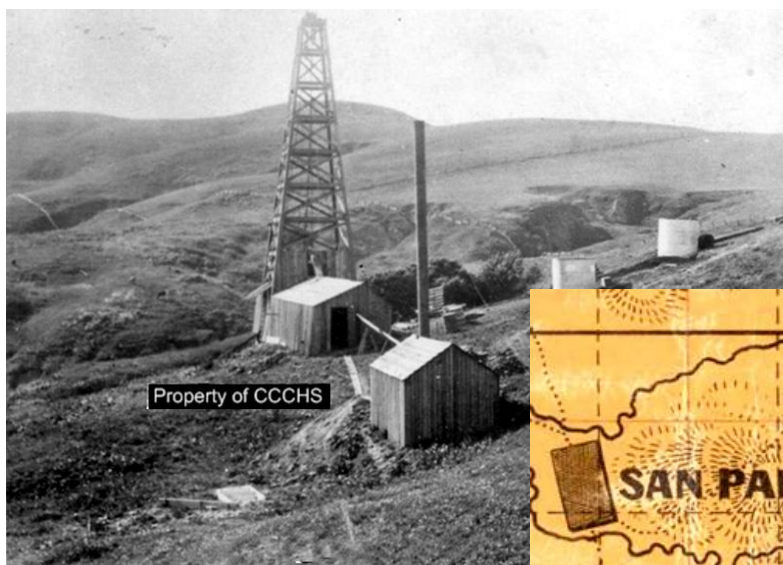
However, there was another site in El Sobrante, then known as the "Tar Ranch" or "White Tar Ranch" which did yield some quantity of the slimy goop that others had only hoped for. Seen here at left, is an oil rig on the Clark Road Tar Ranch in a photo dated 1904.



As early as 1868, the San Francisco Examiner published a short article on Oil to denounce those who doubted the existence of real oil wells in California indicating "Ile" had been struck at the White Tar Ranch, on the San Pablo road. "Mr. Jacob Wray has found the oleaginous fluid in large quantities, and anyone who doubts can visit

Mr. Wray at the California Market, and there see twenty barrels of the crude to testify to the correctness of our assertion that there is oil in California."

Another article in the San Francisco Examiner stated "The Mount Diablo Oil Company of San Francisco; (G. W. Terrill, president) secured control of the Old Tar Ranch, situated about 2 miles easterly from San Pablo. Oil was found on this ranch many years ago, and several shallow wells have been drilled on it. In 1899, Mr. J. W. Laymance of Oakland drilled a 170' well. He states that much seepage oil was found. By October 1900, a drilling plant was on the ground."



These images show a Richmond Oil Company well at Tar Ranch on a ridge at the end of Clark Road between Wildcat Canyon and San Pablo Creek (left) and the location of the Petroleum Works south of Colonel May's ranch on Rancho Sobrante (below).



Of course, as with any financial endeavor that's too good to be true, there were never sufficient quantities of oil extracted by these oil companies to be of any noteworthy consequence. The rush to extract oil from the Contra Costa petroleum deposits had declined and, like their dreams of becoming rich, soon dried up. And, although the Mount Diablo Oil Company of San Francisco filed bankruptcy in August 1903 selling all equipment and their property located on Tar Ranch, they later emerged as the Mount Diablo Oil Company of Los Angeles.

History Center Update:

Donald Bastin



When will we open? We don't know. While the pandemic seemed on the wane just weeks ago, it has since gained strength, and the County re-opening plans scheduled for July have evaporated. We have given up trying to predict an opening date and will instead wait for the library to throw open its doors to the public. When that happens, we too shall welcome visitors to our new History Center. In the meantime, we continue to work on our displays.

In this photo we see a wagon wheel placed close to our entrance. We don't know its origin, but it is old and authentic, and makes a nice reference to our rural past. Donated by our treasurer, Steve James, and installed by director, Emil Munkres.



We are adding to our exhibits almost daily. At left can be seen the somewhat cramped space at the end of the entranceway. The two doors at the end of this short hallway open onto our heating unit and other controls that cannot be obstructed; but we managed to utilize some of the space without interfering with the access.

received two custom-made display cases, courtesy of Isabel Ziegler, who is the Supervisory Museum Curator for several national park sites in our county (Eugene O'Neill, John Muir, Port Chicago, and Rosie the Riveter). We are grateful for this valuable donation.



We have also

2020 Graduation *Steve James*



Every June brings thousands to the stage, to receive their diplomas. Colleges, High Schools, and even elementary students receive accolades from friends and family. Parties, Senior Balls, and trips to far-away beaches are planned. Fun for all, as our youth prepare to advance to the next stage of their lives.

Not this year! 2020 will go down in history as the COVID-19 graduation. With the shelter-in-place orders forcing schools and students to adapt. Online classrooms with ZOOM.

Curb-side pickup of books and paper lessons. Parents and Grandparents struggle with computer skills, frustration with behavioral issues and find a new respect for Teachers.

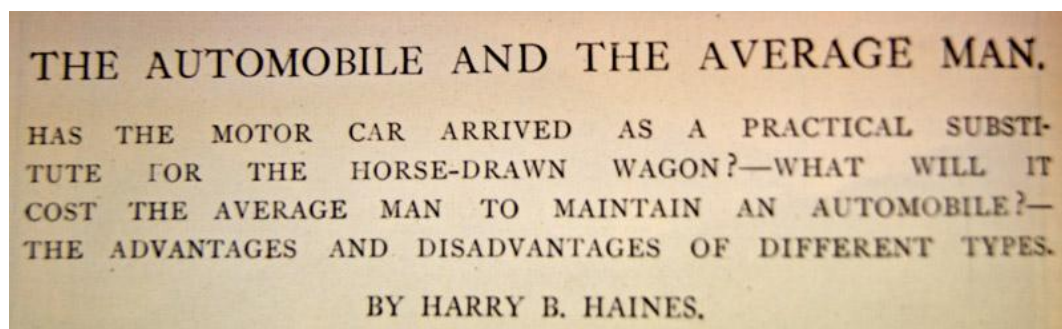


How can we celebrate this milestone? We decorate the SUV, post signs in the front yard, and have car caravan parades. Schools set up curb-side diploma pickups. We schedule a time to drive up to see our teacher one last time and pick up any personal items that were left at school.

Congratulations to our special COVID-19 El Sobrante graduates! You'll be able to look back years from now and share your historical experience with friends and family.

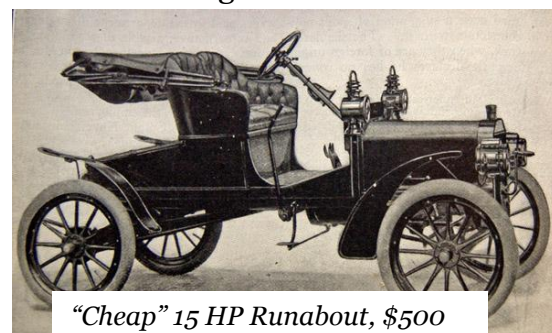
As you may know, we share our space in the Fahden House with the **Friends of the Library**. Virtually every library in the County has its own “Friends” group, whose mission is to support their local library. The El Sobrante Friends group goes back many decades, and was instrumental in generating money and other support necessary for the construction of our community’s first purpose-built library building in 1961. Today, funds are generated primarily by the sale of books and magazines which have been donated to the Friends group for that purpose. That activity was naturally interrupted by the reconstruction of the Fahden House which was associated with the library fire, and by the subsequent pandemic. Hopefully though, the book sales will resume, and this is something that I very much look forward to.

As an historian, I particularly like to read old books, magazines, and even advertising material. In the field of history, these can often be considered to be “primary sources,” and are invaluable for acquiring a sense of what people were thinking about in the past, and how they were interpreting the events of their time.



One of the oddball items I picked up was called “The American Monthly Review of Reviews” dated January, 1907. I had never heard of this publication, but a little on-line digging revealed that it was an important

and influential publication in the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th. What particularly caught my eye was a piece entitled “The Automobile and the Average Man.” This turned out to be an in-depth study, by an early auto enthusiast, of the practicality of owning a car, particularly for the not-so-rich. At this time, the car was a very costly item, and still considered a rich man’s plaything. But more and more common folk were finding that a car might make sense, and could be more practical and operated for less expense than a stable of horses (or even one horse). But at this point in its development, the automobile came in three flavors: Steam, Electric, and Gasoline. And here the author compares the three options.



“Cheap” 15 HP Runabout, \$500

Steam power, at this time, was the more familiar option. Steam had been around for more than a century, and everyone was familiar with steam-powered trains, farm tractors, boats and ferries, and stationary engines. A steam car was not so unusual or frightening (boiler explosions were uncommon). Steamers were quiet and powerful, but suffered from a long warm-up time. And, due to the need for frequent re-watering, range was an issue. Range, of course, was even more of an issue for the electric. But here the author makes an eye-brow raising statement, concerning “. . . the long-promised 100 or 150 mile storage battery.” Does that sound familiar? Hard to believe that, just six

years into the 20th century, a long-range battery was already “long-promised.” If such a battery were made available, he asserts confidently that “. . . the electric will come to be not only one of the most popular types of horseless vehicles, but ‘the’ most popular one.” Here we are, over 100 years later, and that dream of a long-range battery has finally been realized. Whether the electric will become the most popular type of personal transportation vehicle remains to be seen, but it has certainly reached the point in its development that it will not go away. As a fan of the electric car (we are driving our fourth), it is fascinating to see that the same arguments were being made concerning its future while the sun of the 20th century was just over the horizon.

Among the other prizes found was a large volume, printed in 1899, concerning the new American territories, principally the Philippines, acquired as a result of the Spanish-American War. Fascinating to read the arguments for and against the expansion of U.S. domination of the globe (some have called this the beginning of American Imperialism), by the likes of then-president William McKinley, William Jennings Bryan, and others. Nothing like reading a prominent American’s own words, regarding a topic that still exercises the American conscience.

One can even find old product brochures. I found an owner’s manual, in perfect condition, for the 1931 GE refrigerator. This was one of the first practical and affordable refrigerators on the market, and a quantum improvement on the ice box. It contains wonderful tidbits for the homemaker, and is full of recipes that were popular at the time.

Whatever your interest, you will likely find it at the next Friends sale. Hopefully that will happen soon.

The Leftovers is published quarterly. Articles for publication are encouraged, as are comments. See e-mail address below.

The El Sobrante Historical Society is a formal nonprofit organization, and donations may be tax-deductible. We are dedicated to the preservation and display of the history of the community of El Sobrante. We depend on our members and local residents for the information, artifacts, and photographs that make up the society’s collection. Become a member and help out! It’s free and simple. Just visit the website, at elsobranthehistoricalsociety.com.

Visit us on **Facebook**:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ElSobranteHistoricalSociety/>

Mission Statement

To promote the awareness and appreciation of El Sobrante Valley history through preservation and education, and chronicling of the community’s heritage for current and future generations.

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Visit us on-line at:

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