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THE REGION & STATE

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SECTION

Many unknown oil and gas wells

By John A. Piro
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Staff Writer

It was 140 years ago this month that Oil Edwin L. Drake, an employee of the Pennsylvania Rock Oil Company, began the arduous task of drilling an oil well on leased land near Oil Creek.

On Aug. 28, 1859, he was successful, striking a vein of oil at the depth of 69 1/2 feet and establishing the first oil well in the world. Since then, state officials estimate — and admittedly they are only guessing — that 22,000 gas and oil wells have been dug in Pennsylvania.

These wells are part of Pennsylvania's rich tradition of oil and gas exploration, and the state's contribution to its industries and the boom they inspired can't be overstated.

Still, the legacy of all that money made from the state's natural resources is a problem to estimate that Pennsylvania can't begin to afford the cost of correcting it.

When the boom faded or when wells stopped being productive, thousands of wells were simply abandoned, rather than being properly sealed.

The state has managed to keep records on an estimated 10,000 of them, but it means that somewhere out there — in fields, along streams and even under homes — are an estimated 184,000 abandoned wells, called orphan wells, might be leaking contaminants into the environment or waiting to explode in most cases, it is impossible to find the original operator, so the state is left to plug them.

The problem orphan wells create are twofold. First, the state Department of Environmental Protection has been able to identify only 1,500 of the orphan wells, leaving more than 173,000 unaccounted for. Second, it would cost between \$40 million and \$100 million to repair the few orphan wells that have been discovered, according to DEP estimates — money that simply isn't in the state's budget.

In a report released last week to Gov. Ridge and the state Legislature, James E. Cox, director of the Bureau of Oil and Gas Management, recommended that the state set a new way to finance the plugging of orphan wells through either the General Fund or a bond issue.

"If you look at the numbers of orphan wells, they just aren't enough of a funding source," Erb said in an interview shortly after the report was released. "It's like me a more active program."

For now, he is limited to plugging the wells as money becomes available.

And while the process has moved along at a fairly steady pace, it wasn't quick enough for two young girls' owners.

On Jan. 6, Beaver County towns Brian Datz, 17, and Francis McCoskey, 16, died after intentionally inhaling methane fumes leaking from one of the wells in the property. The practice is known as huffing.

Adding to the tragedy of the boys' deaths was that the well in question was among 28 orphan wells that the DEP had on a list to be plugged with the earliest to be in the spring.

The DEP estimates abandoned wells on a 20-point scale, with 100 indicating the most dangerous.

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BRIAN O'NEILL

Old friends can lose their luster

I imagine this. Twenty-five years ago you had a good friend, one so warm and kind that other people loved, absolutely loved, seeing the two of you together. You went your separate ways.

Now all these fancy suits in New York and Hollywood were money in your face just as the two of you will get together again. Once a week. And you're not even married.

This is what I thought when I read that, next fall, ABC will re-run Mary McCormack's television series "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

Don't get me wrong. I loved the show. I grew up watching reruns of "The Dick Van Dyke Show," starring Moore as Laura Petrie. As I've mentioned before, when she danced around her suburban living room in those corset pants, I felt urges I didn't yet understand, even as I made silent pleas that my Mom never let me see her.

So when Moore became Mary McCormack, I was in my teens. I read for her from the go-go. I loved her television series "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

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Many Yellow Cab drivers give customers their cell-phone numbers. One has even set up a dispatch service, which will be the subject of a hearing.



Cab drivers wait for fares behind the Westin William Penn on William Penn Way, Downtown.

PUC protests driver's own dispatch system

By Lawrence Walsh
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Staff Writer

"This S-11," "Hi, honey, where are you?" "Honey,"

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telephone number that appears on Schenck's business cards, and their conversation bypassed Yellow Cab's dispatch service.

Schenck is not the only taxi driver who asks regular customers to call him on his cellular telephone.

"It's a convenience for my customers and a safety feature for me," said Schenck. "At 14, I have a car and cell and so on for 10 years."

"I've never been robbed, but I have had some fares run on me," he said. "I wouldn't have to worry at all if I knew all my customers."

His customers, who enjoy his jovial demeanor, promptness and clean cab, have little trouble finding Schenck's business card in their purses or wallets.

The yellow and green cabs with a gold star identifies him as "Dan S-11," a "professional driver," and lists his phone number.

"I call myself S-11 because that's how many letters follow the S in my last name," he said.

About half of Yellow Cab's drivers now use cellular telephones and business cards.

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Pals send tape an 'at to priest in Rome

By Tomlin Ovi
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Staff Writer

So this priest is over in Rome working for his Franciscan order as a priest, but he never Pittsburgh on his last trip. He has a good time making with all of us.

Since his arrival in Rome, where he works in an office next to the Vatican, he's kept in touch with his pals in Pittsburgh by mail. They usually exchange greetings in Pittsburgh. Last week, Father Gerald, 47, sent a small Christmas card to his pals in Pittsburgh.

He has been in Rome since 1982, when he was assigned to the Franciscan order. He has been in Rome since 1982, when he was assigned to the Franciscan order.

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Escaped slaves' tales remain inspirational

They still teach, speaker contends

By Monica L. Haynes
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Consider the life of Robert Jackson, a slave from Virginia. Beaten and bloodied after an escape attempt in 1845, he was a free man in less than a week.

In a speech at the Pitt Law School last week, the speaker said that Jackson's story is an example of the kind of courage that is needed to overcome adversity.

"I was so proud of you," he said. "I was so proud of you." "I was so proud of you."

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Tunnel crash driver blamed

Trucker speeding, trooper determines

By Maryanne Pitz
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Staff Writer

A tractor-trailer driver who crashed outside the Fort Pitt Tunnel Saturday afternoon was driving too fast, his brakes too old and made a bad decision when he swerved, a Pennsylvania State Police trooper said yesterday.

State Police trooper said the driver was driving a six-hour traffic jam, said driver John Volz, 40, of Tavertown should have kept going on the road instead of turning left to avoid hitting cars in front of him.

"It was a very poor decision on his part. If he would have used the appropriate skills driving downhill, he wouldn't have had this problem," Schatz said.

Schatz said he found that conclusion on the length of the skid marks left by Volz's rig.

The driver's third mistake was swerving left instead of continuing into the tunnel.

That's when the tractor-trailer Volz was driving for Wayne W. Sell Corp. of Sover veered across the median and slammed into two cars and a bus coming out of the Fort Pitt Tunnel from Downtown.

The 12:15 p.m. crash injured all four drivers, and the tunnel and Fort Pitt Bridge remained closed until 6 p.m., bringing up traffic in Downtown and the South Hills well into the evening.

Volz, who complained of pain in his left shoulder, was released from Allegheny General Hospital on Saturday. He could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Two of the three other drivers remained hospitalized.

Frank Schick, a PAT employee since April 1981, remained at Allegheny General Hospital but was moved out of intensive care. His condition remained serious, said Karen Dwyer, a hospital spokeswoman. Schick, who was driving a PAT bus, suffered a head injury, a broken collarbone and a broken toe.

Julian Hopson, 35, of Williamsport, remained in intensive care. He was driving a private car. He was injured in the crash. He was driving a private car.

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