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Edwin Drake

Though he drilled only three oil wells in his lifetime, Edwin Drake (1819-1880) is known as the "Father of the Petroleum Industry" because the technology he devised to drill the first commercial oil well in the United States revolutionized how crude oil was produced and launched the large-scale petroleum industry.

Edwin Laurentine Drake, born on March 11, 1819, in Greenville County, New York, grew up on family farms in New York and Vermont. He left home at age 19, having received a common school education, and wandered the Midwest and East, working at various jobs. In 1850 he settled in New Haven, Connecticut, and became a railway conductor for the New York and New Haven Railroad. Ill health forced his retirement in 1857, but it also opened a new opportunity for him.

The opportunity occurred while Drake was staying in the same hotel as George H. Bissell and Jonathan G. Eveleth, founders of the newly formed Seneca Oil Company. The company was the successor to the Pennsylvania Rock Oil Company, the first oil company in the United States, which had been created to exploit ground-level seepage of oil near Titusville (Pennsylvania). Chemist Benjamin Silliman, Jr. had analyzed oil from the site and determined that, after refining, it could be used as an illuminant, as well as for other purposes. The Seneca Oil Company founders needed someone to inspect the oil springs on their property and make a report. Drake got the job because he had a free pass on the railway. Drake had never been an officer, let alone in the military. Nevertheless, James M. Townsend, one of the investors, used the salutatory title "Colonel" in his correspondence with Drake. The title stuck and Drake became commonly known as Colonel Drake.

Smelly But Useful Seep Oil

Humans and the gods had used oil for thousands of years before Seneca Oil Company sought to make its production worthwhile. Fred Hapgood wrote in *National Geographic*: "In Greek mythology Medea set her rival on fire with naphtha. The Mesopotamians used asphalt as a building material 5,000 years ago. But as valuable a product as petroleum had already become, gods and mortals alike until the 19th century took oil as the earth gave it to them, from seeps and springs." The petroleum that surfaced in salt borings also was another source of oil.

An early name for petroleum, "Seneca Oil," alludes to the trade in oil by Seneca Indians of western New York in the 18th century. After the American Revolution, white settlers discovered Oil Creek in northwestern Pennsylvania and began skimming petroleum from little springs in the



banks and in the bed. They built rings of timbers and barrels from which they collected the trapped oil. The largest well on Oil Creek produced only about 20 barrels a year, yet the effort was worth it. There was a great demand for oil, which was bottled for medicinal uses, such as for a purge and ointment. In 1853 Joel D. Angier purchased the first petroleum lease in the United States. This lease gave him the right to collect oil from an Oil Creek seep on the Brewer, Watson, and Co. lumber property near Titusville. The lumber company had used the seep oil for lighting and to lubricate machinery.

In *Early Days of Oil*, Paul H. Ciddens told how Samuel M. Kier sold his bottled "Petroleum, Rock Oil" "as a cure for all ailments, human or animal." Although he had sales agents throughout the country, Kier still had more oil from the seeps and salt wells on his father's Tarentum, Pennsylvania, property than he could sell. Oil had been used for illumination, but in its pure form was smelly and sticky. Kier thought if he could overcome these drawbacks, he would have a widely used product. After consulting with a chemist in 1850, he built a crude one-barrel still in Pittsburgh and began distilling crude oil into "carbon oil," or kerosene. Because it was a cheaper, safer, better illuminant than other fuels on the market, such as whale oil, carbon oil came into general use in western Pennsylvania and New York City. Its price more than doubled. Kier added a five-barrel still to his operation, which was the first commercial refinery in America. Now he needed a more plentiful, reliable source of oil. It was around then that "crude oil" attracted attention and finally stimulated serious experiments