

My World Exploded

One man remembers the great oil well disaster of 1935.

BY GRANT B. HARRIS

Editor's Note: The following memoir was written by local author Grant B. Harris (now deceased) in 1973 as he recalled the events of 38 years before. The manuscript was provided to *St. George Magazine* courtesy of the Harris family.

Today the oil well wildcatter is as far out of date as modern surgery done with a tomahawk but this was not so in the old days, say 38 years ago, March 1935. Oh, those depression days, when a bum asked for a nickel for coffee and a donut, so did the cafe.

Charles D. Alsop was among the last of the successful wildcatters who had started low and come up through the ranks the hard way. He developed modern techniques to raise money. He depended upon cunning and experience as attested to by the three-carat blue white perfect sparkler on his ring finger. His promotional abilities enabled his precious family, two lovely teen-age daughters, a beautiful middle-aged wife and a son in his first year at West Point, to eat and live in the upper bracket and ride high in the buggy. He was a Texan, a southern gentleman and a specialized operator, a hard man in a tough job, despite appearances.

Charley had propositioned me in the early 1930's to join his operation as a master mechanic, machine operator, welder and general equipment manager and to do anything and everything else that needed doing at all wells on the Utah-Arizona stateline. Just recently he had returned from a fund raising excursion in the middle west with a new subsidy of more than half a million in green funds to further pursue the oil devils and their phantoms.

"How much per day to throw in with us?" he had inquired of me, and then he proceeded to lay down the ground rules after I voiced my offer of Ten Dollars per day, which wasn't hay in those days. "No union, no overtime pay," he stated flatly, "work as long as necessary, no job insurance, no paid vacation, no fringe benefits and I will make it Ten Dollars and Fifty cents." With this the conversation ended. So now I had the job.

Today I am sitting on the old dome

sight of the best possible oil producer Arrowhead Petroleum ever had, the "Escalante #2." More than thirty seven long years have gone and I am somewhat overcome and carried away by the memories. The nostalgia surrounding the long ago and far away seem to intensify the deep, and almost forgotten emotional experiences of the past. Suddenly they are in a clear and near perspective again. As I sit on this spot and close my eyes I see in technicolor that beautiful one hundred and twenty foot steel tower. A U.S. Naval Reserve structure leased from the government during the depression to bolster the economy and may-hap, just possibly produce that much needed commodity called crude oil.

This unit was the most up-to-date drilling equipment known to man. All the other wells of the Arrowhead operation were wooden, 64 to 84 feet in height, with the ancient walking beam or standard drilling tools. The Escalante by comparison was a monstrous beauty with steel rotary table powered by several extra large electric motors. I was paid more than drillers, almost as much as the general superintendent. We made many of our own tools, bailers, wallhooks and others. But I was a master craftsman with machines and the acetylene torch. Arc-

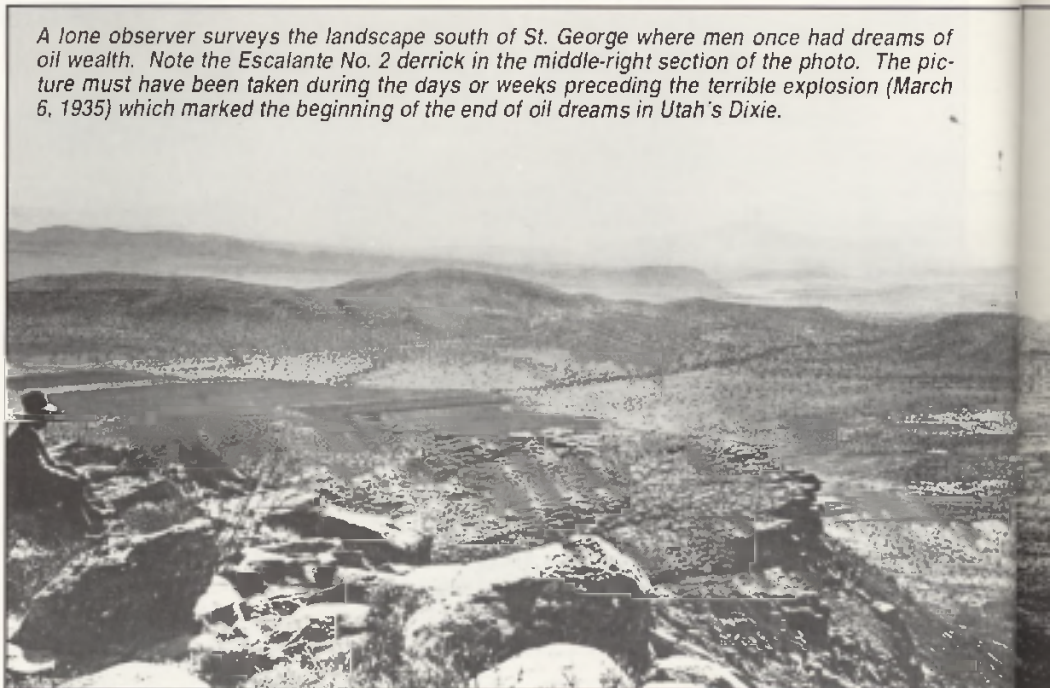
welding was in its infancy, not reliable and all hard-facing on standard bits from the blast furnace was applied with gas.

Our only work shop was at a well we called the "Punch Bowl." Here we repaired and overhauled all rolling stock, trucks and stationary gasoline engines that furnished power for the other wells. Diesel was still in the future although we were mobile and versatile and did most repair work on the spot.

The unforgivable sin for an onlooker or bystander has always been to ask any member of an oil well crew from the owner to the lowest roust-a-bout, "How deep is the hole?" This is strictly taboo and insulting. The general superintendent acted as greeter and I can still hear Tex Bethea answer this embarrassing question in his deep rumbling drawl, "Well Suh, don't-cha-know we all gitten purty well outa the grass roots heah." Then Tex would invariably and disdainfully walk away.

The rock at the Escalante was hard, to come out and go back in the hole took most of a long shift and sometimes the new bit would do six feet and sometimes six inches. Imagine how our stock shot up when at 4277 feet we struck our first oil sand. Charley called in a professional oil well shooter who within a few days

A lone observer surveys the landscape south of St. George where men once had dreams of oil wealth. Note the Escalante No. 2 derrick in the middle-right section of the photo. The picture must have been taken during the days or weeks preceding the terrible explosion (March 6, 1935) which marked the beginning of the end of oil dreams in Utah's Dixie.



supervised loading, lowering and shooting seven cans of 80 percent nitroglycerin jelly in the bottom of that hole. The cans were tin torpedoes five inches in diameter and ten feet in length with two metal ears on each end. The first can was loaded, tamped, and primed with a number eight electric detonator, placed in the jelly at the top of the can which was then raised by the ears on the sand line and can number two attached.

The nitroglycerin jelly came in fifty pound wooden boxes. Each stick was twelve inches long by five inches in diameter. My two assistants helped me tamp with a large wooden plunger the cans full of jelly and insert the detonators. This we did on the cat-walk some six feet above ground level. Everything went smoothly as we lowered that first seven-can shot to the bottom on Sunday, March 3, 1935. The hole was then filled with water to cushion the shot and force the explosive pressure downward. All personnel were moved several hundred yards away and above, to the rim of a gypsum rock ledge surrounding the rig on three sides. I was left alone in the dog-house which joined the derrick floor. My instructions were to touch off the shot at Charley's signal, when he waived his hat from the rocky rim. One wire from the reel was grounded to the collar. The explosion would be triggered when I inserted the bare end of the other reel wire into a live electric socket.

Observers stationed on the rock ledge, about the same level as the top of the rig told me later that the water from the casing went more than fifty feet over the top of the tower. It all came down on my head. The sand-line, a one-half inch

cable, was cut, shattered and balled up in the hole in addition to being lifted completely from the sand-reel by the straight up water pressure. At the request of the driller, I climbed the 120-feet of steel ladder, went outside over the crown, and replaced the sand-line. I was by this act, after dark on a Sunday, the last man ever on top of that rig.

We cleaned out the hole the next morning, ran the bailer, and struck a kitchen match over the collar. Instantly a beautiful blue-white flame shot up and continued to warm us until extinguished. Flickinger, the shooter, declared we had oil, stating the seven-can shot had blown a hole down below large enough to throw in a small town.

That very day it was decided to shoot a second shot. So on Wednesday March 6, 1935, with my assistants carrying the welding tanks we covered more than two miles to the pump station welding the water pipe and filling the tank. We arrived at the Escalante for the last time after dark on that cold, wet, drizzly evening. The air was charged with static and I remember the depression which was quickly dispelled when Charley motioned me to the belt-house where a nearly full case of good bourbon in pints, was waiting invitingly. I pulled the pin on a fresh bottle and slugged it manfully, then carried the remaining contents to my chilled helpers who were already busy tamping jelly in #7 torpedo on the cat-walk.

Exact procedures had been followed as for shot number one. Six cans had been wired by our two electricians on tall step ladders. One thing struck me, the driller, Mike Eric, was missing. He and Charley

had argued, too many people had been invited through Charley's exuberance, they were standing around all over the derrick floor and filled the dog-house around the stove. Most all the office help was present as well as other females including Charley's wife. At this juncture I definitely recall thinking how efficient and effective as a driller Mike had always been. He was of Syrian extraction, had drilled wells most all over the world, he had served six years in the French Foreign Legion and been transferred to the U.S. Army when World War One was declared, because he had American citizenship. All told when he came home from the wars he carried fourteen bullet holes. He had a favorite saying, "When I die, something will fall on me." He and I, as his tool dresser, once pulled the crown blocks in on a wooden derrick at three o'clock in the morning when we were hooked on to a fish (a string of drilling tools) with a seven line set of blocks. We had no hard hats, we had hard heads. Mike was a fine man, forthright, happy, reckless, although extremely careful in a carelessly professional style. A man who knew the drilling business like none other. He had simply driven away. Charley had taken over the controls under the head-ache post in his \$250 blue serge suit and assumed the driller's responsibilities. Maybe the whiskey caused the argument or too many invited towns-people, Charley's position on cloud nine, the dream being realized of an oil producer or the prospects of one. However the argument saved some lives as the derrick floor was cleared of visitors.

Charley in a pair of borrowed gloves was busy, so I made another trip to the belt-house and came out with a fresh pint. It was eight P.M. but Irving Barney, a driller from the Punch Bowl was talking to Charley who turned to me and ordered, "Take one of your men and go see what ails the big Le Roi" referring to the gasoline engine power unit at the Punch Bowl. As I turned around I motioned to Del Sullivan to come with me, so we left Billy Maloney there. Now more than thirty seven years have passed and gone and we have never been to the Punch Bowl as yet. Just sixteen minutes after we left, that shot accidentally exploded while still hanging in the derrick. It was like a sonic boom where we were, five miles from the well, but we knew immediately what had happened so we turned and drove back.

Total devastation greeted us, the derrick was gone, twisted and mangled. Everything was on fire. Marrow chilling horror dominated the scene, only three



older men were rambling and going every which way. None had been near the explosion. Sampson, Blake and Pickett had been sitting in Pickett's car sixty yards from the rig. The car had been lifted thirty feet and set back on its wheels but the top was completely gone. Covington and Ericson who had been behind the power house were both injured, but both recovered. Drill pipe was everywhere. Two living girls were carried from the fire, but only one lived. A hole thirty feet deep was where the derrick had stood on concrete pillars. The

hole was a fiery holocaust, but audible moans came from the bottom. A crew member jumped into that blazing fire, disregarding his own safety. Crawled under the fire with his nose on the bottom, located the girl and emerged with her in a fireman's carry, burned but unaided. Two days later with the fire all out and the ground cold, the same man went to the bottom of that same hole but found it impossible to climb out by himself. He was rescued on a rope, the same day that girl died.

The dangerous 440 volt power lines

were shredded and popping in all directions, so the switches were pulled. By the cold light of dawn we could see the scattered bodies more than a square mile. At mid-morning seven corpses or part corpses had been laid side by side on a white canvas tarp from the core house. Several people were missing completely except for scraps, bits and pieces that were gathered by remaining crew members and buried in a trench, about 350 pounds in all. The area was roped off and a lay-out chart was sketched. By the third day we had a satisfactory idea as to what relative space each person had occupied. That afternoon we attended a blanket community funeral service held in the St. George, Utah L.D.S. Tabernacle. Sully and I had been asked by Billy Maloney's mother to be pall-bearers. So six strong men carried a casket that contained only two bone joints from his lower back. These were found 164 steps from the explosion. All 4,000 local citizens were there but ironically the exact words of the first speaker come strangely flooding back. "I came here to talk about my friend, Charles D. Alsop..."

I have no way of knowing how much of my own soul was shot down that tragic day, nor what part of my heart of hearts was planted in that trench at the Escalante. Surely in these intervening years I have witnessed much more than my share of life's calamities but even yet, on occasion, I suddenly am awakened in the dead of night, when my hands are being held too near my nose by the sickening, nauseating stench of burnt human flesh.

The Arrowhead Petroleum Corporation was blown out of business that day and none of the remaining crew members (although I believe Sully and myself are the only two left) were paid for the extra days.

The secluded cove where this all happened is now beautiful in the semitropical sunshine, even this time of year, the desert holly, chaparral, cactus and sage which grows and flourishes at about 3,000 feet elevation are sparse but radiantly evidenced. The changing glittering gypsum formation in given directions and various reflections sparkles like a million silver stars. Maybe tomorrow, a year, a thousand years from now or even after many centuries some thoughtful stranger sitting here, will be partially blinded by a mysterious shaft of brilliance and in open mouthed bafflement pick up that jewel from Charley's finger and then ponder why any man could have been so careless as to lose his ring. ■

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