

# Surveyors Of The Past . . .

BY DON W. THOMSON



A. P. PATRICK (1849-1948) DISCOVERER OF ALBERTA'S FIRST OIL WELL SITE

The bonanza of oil discoveries, particularly during the middle years of the present century, which occurred in Canada's Midwest, transformed the economy of the Province of Alberta and profoundly altered the attitudes of its citizens. Whatever had lingered on in the form of depression psychology rapidly vanished under the waves of new prosperity. Although this revolution had its beginning at the time of the successful drillings in Leduc field south of Edmonton in 1947, that historic development was preceded by the initial find of liquid "black gold" in Southern Alberta by land surveyor A. P. Patrick. Alfred Poinz Patrick, a graduate from public school in Galt and from Upper Canada College in Toronto, qualified for his preliminary surveying certificate in Ontario. This entitlement to survey in the Banner Province followed a training period during which he was articulated in Ottawa to Robert Sparks, Provincial Land Surveyor (as qualified land surveyors in Ontario were titled during most of the 19th century).

In 1874 young Patrick, at the age of 25, took part in survey work in Manitoba under his party chief Lindsay Russell, soon to become Surveyor General of Canada. A. P. Patrick also participated in exploratory survey work for the C.P.R. north of Lake Superior. In 1877, despite frail health, he was commissioned both as a D.L.S. and a D.T.S. In the following year, on medical advice, he travelled to that part of the North-West Territories known as Southern Alberta. Soon he was thriving on rough fare and a vigorous life outdoors. His work in that part of Western Canada began with a survey

of a large tract of land extending from the Highwood River to Waterton. In the course of this work he struck up a friendship with Lafayette French, a trader and trapper. One day in an Indian encampment the two men came upon an injured boy whose leg had been improperly bandaged. On closer examination they found that the wrapping cloth was soaked in oil. Apparently the substance had been used by a squaw convinced of its healing qualities. Patrick and his companion realized at once the significance of this revelation. But there remained the problem of tracing the oil to its source. Only after considerable argument and the trading to the Indians of some food and a rifle was the squaw induced to guide the two white men to the place where the crude oil was obtained. At the end of a long search oil seepages were found along the banks of the mountain stream then known as Oil Creek, later as Cameron Creek. That was in the summer of 1878.

For some ten years Patrick tried to interest drillers or men with capital to invest but to little avail. Finally in 1889 he filed a formal claim to 640 acres in the vicinity of the discovery site. Early in the present century a prominent stockman near Calgary, one John Lineham, became interested in Patrick's efforts. A company was formed which included Patrick and Lineham's close friend, Arthur Sifton, later to become Premier of Alberta. This new firm was created to develop oil production on the acreage owned by Patrick. A drilling rig, costing \$680.00 was shipped from Petrolia, Ontario, to the site and operations began in November, 1901. On Sep-

tember 21st of the following year, at a depth of 1020 feet the drillers struck oil. It is reported that the oil began to flow at the rate of 300 barrels a day. But soon the drillers of the discovery well began to encounter difficulties. Drilling tools became lodged in the hole. Steam pressure in the boiler at the well site was insufficient to dislodge the tools. Accordingly the safety valve was tied down to produce more pressure whereupon the ancient equipment, unable to withstand the additional strain, blew up. Soon the daily flow of oil was reduced from 300 barrels to 40 barrels. Several storage tanks, built to hold 2,000 gallons, had been filled before operations were suspended.

In the spring of 1905 the Canadian Pacific Railway, curious about the spate of rumours concerning the production of the pioneer well, asked the Dominion Land Surveyor William Pearce to visit the site and report on what he found there. Pearce confirmed the existence of three full storage tanks, along with a small but primitive refinery. During several years following the initial strike numerous holes were drilled in the vicinity of the discovery well without any trace of oil showing. In 1907 drilling in the Waterton area was discontinued. In the years following his initial find Mr. Patrick surveyed townsites along the Canadian Pacific Railway from Fort Macleod northward to Edmonton. In addition he was one of the first ranchers in the high country south of Calgary. In these early years of western development he was also active surveying in Calgary and in nearby Indian reserves of the Stony and Sarcee tribes. In 1890 he qualified to survey in British Columbia and became an Alberta Land Surveyor in 1911. From a condition of indifferent health as a youth A. P. Patrick had developed great physical stamina. But in 1943 he fell and broke a hip. He had come to be known generally in the West as the father of commercial oil production on the prairies.

He died in April, 1948 in his Calgary home, just a few months before his 100th birthday anniversary. Not only had he served the City of Calgary as a pioneer land surveyor but as an alderman for two terms of office. On the face of things it might appear highly unlikely that the discoverer of the first site in Alberta of a well productive of crude oil would turn out to be the son of a distinguished Clerk of the House of Commons of Canada, as indeed he was. Not so surprising is the fact that his training in Ontario as a land surveyor played an influential part in developing his perception of the possibilities in making use of a great national and natural resource.