

History of Oil Development in Ventura County

This information, included here for reference only, is sourced from the Resources Appendix of a previous Ventura County General Plan, last amended March 19, 2019, and superseded by the 2040 General Plan, adopted September 15, 2020.

Drawn to Ventura County by reports of "oil struggling to the surface at every available point," George Shoobridge Gilbert, referred to as California's first true petroleum pioneer, began extraction operations at Sulphur Mountain in 1861 (Triem, 1985). Most of the early unrefined oil found in Ventura County was a thick, sticky substance called asphaltum. Originally, asphaltum was used to surface roads and seal roofs on houses, yet early oilmen like Gilbert began looking for a way to process this material and the good quality, light gravity oil also found in Ventura County, into a more marketable product. In 1854, oil collected at Sulphur Mountain was refined in home-made stills. The first commercial oil refinery in the county was built in 1861 by Gilbert. It was located in the Ojai Valley and produced between 300 and 400 gallons of refined oil a week (DOG, 1983).

By the 1880's almost all of the State's oil production was in Ventura County, as the discoveries at Sulphur Mountain, Rancho Ojai, Rancho Sespe, and Rancho Santa Paula became known (DOG, 1983). The most successful early well, discovered in 1865, was "Ojai 6", which is considered to be the first oil well in California to produce commercially (Triem, 1985). The State's first oil "gusher" occurred in Adams Canyon near Santa Paula in 1888 and was the first big well in California, flowing at an estimated 1500 barrels of oil a day.

As the nation's demand for oil grew, Ventura County continued to be a major oil producer. The South Mountain and Ventura oil fields were discovered in the early 1900's. By this time, oil was rapidly replacing coal as a fuel for locomotives, ships, and homes (Mintier, 1988). In 1914, gasoline outsold kerosene for the first time, due largely to the increasing popularity of the automobile. The introduction of the Model T Ford in the 1920's led to an even higher demand for oil (Mintier, 1988).

Ventura County experienced tremendous population growth during the 1920's due primarily to the discovery of the Ventura Avenue Oil Field in 1916. By 1926, this field was producing over 20,000 barrels of oil a day and its level of productivity brought in thousands of oilworkers, geologists, engineers, and oil-related businesses to the City of Ventura and outlying areas (Triem, 1985).

During the same periods, the town of Santa Paula underwent significant changes with the discovery of the South Mountain Oil Field in 1916 (Triem, 1985). Up until then, agriculture was the only large industry in Santa Paula, but the discovery of oil at South Mountain created an oil boom period which lasted for approximately ten years.

Oil production and exploration practically came to a halt during the 1930's Depression years. Subsequently, World War II brought a resurgence of national oil production, which continued sporadically throughout the 1950's. New oil discoveries in California were limited

to smaller fields and to the development of extensions of field boundaries or deeper drilling in existing fields (DOG, 1983).

No large onshore fields have been discovered in Ventura County since the Saticoy Field in 1955 (DOG, 1988). In the 1960's, the first serious exploration of submerged lands was undertaken, which led to the discovery of two large oil fields off the coast of Santa Barbara County (DOG, 1983). Subsequently, Ventura County oil exploration efforts were then concentrated on offshore fields and operators began to explore new, more efficient methods of oil production.