

Music and the Pennsylvania Oil Boom

On the heels of Colonel Edwin L. Drake's oil well of 1859 came the loud sounds of oil music. Songs named *PA Has Struck Ile*, *Oil on the Brain*, and *Petroleum Gallop* may seem out of the ordinary now, but, in the early days of oil, these songs were extremely popular. Lyrics were humorous, narrative, or libelous, often using satire to poke fun at oil companies. They tell the story of 'striking it rich' and portray oil companies that took advantage of the oil boom. One song, *Famous Oil Firms*, lists its writer as E. Pluribus Oilem (literally "out of many, oil", a play on e pluribus unum) and its composer as Petroleana. These fake names are called 'pseudonyms.' The plays on words knew no boundaries, and the U.S. copyright offices in district courts kindly allowed funny pseudonyms.

The end of the American Civil War in 1865 helped the popularity of music. The American public was engrossed by the war while it was happening and had little attention for much else. However, when the war ended, individuals educated in music were free to create new music. While the new post-war music often retold the stories of the Civil War, it also celebrated the future. By the end of the war, the oil boom in Pennsylvania had generated a great deal of money and attention, providing a war-torn nation with hope for a prosperous future. People expressed this newfound hope through oil songs.

Music publishing became popular following the Civil War. In the decades following the war, the hub of publishing was New York City. Although oil tunes were written in the oil region, most music was sent to publishers in New York City, or occasionally Philadelphia. While the end of the Civil War brought the reality of everyday life back, music became more upbeat than melancholy. Musicians achieved this by writing waltzes and polkas.

Most songs may have started out as ditties sung around derricks, but the sheet music can be dated from the copyright. The first oil song officially published with a copyright was *Oil on the Brain* by Eastburn, a pseudonym for Joseph E. Winner, in 1864. The copyright was issued just before the end of the American Civil War. It is no surprise, however, that the song was republished in 1865, after the end of the war, to renew popularity.

Compositions strictly for piano and brass bands rivaled classical pieces; the left hand encounters dizzying note formations in *Oil Fever Galop* and *Petroleum Court Dance*. Sheet music in the oil region was already difficult to read, and readers also needed to understand Pennsylvania Dutch, also called 'Pennsilfaanisch Deitsch' in its native German. Pennsylvania Dutch incorporates German with English and was popular among German, French, and Swiss immigrants. *Ile or Vay Down in Bennisylvany* uses this language and dialect. Ironically, instructions for the player are in Italian, meaning the composer knew three different languages.

Edwin L. Drake's discovery well and the resulting oil fever were not the only reasons to sing. Even earlier stories of oil were cause for celebration, dating to as early as 1840 – the time of Samuel Kier's rock oil. Bands sprung up in the oil region, playing upbeat tunes and marches for the public. Music became a pastime. The Franklin Silver Cornet Band of Franklin, Pennsylvania recently celebrated its 150th anniversary and still performs concerts in the oil region. Oil is such a rich part of the history of the region that its discovery and stories are worth singing and playing.

Franklin Silver Cornet Band

The Franklin Silver Cornet Band of Franklin, Pennsylvania organized in 1856, three years before Col. Edwin L. Drake struck oil and five years prior to the start of the American Civil War. It had

humble beginnings, struggling to obtain instruments or a suitable conductor, but managed to find both by the end of 1856. The hard work of the Franklin Band, as it was then known, was not lost on the residents of Venango County. It received compliments in local newspapers from those who heard the brass music waft into their homes. Of course, at this point, most of the music performed was composed for holiday celebrations, like the Fourth of July.

The commercial discovery of oil was a cause for celebration in the oil region. Edwin L. Drake's discovery lifted the spirits of local residents looking to get rich. With oil and money flowing in the oil region, residents had time to sit near the Franklin Bandstand or Fountain Park and enjoy what the Franklin Silver Cornet Band had to offer. Music was a means of celebrating the prosperity of the region.

As time went on, the Franklin Silver Cornet Band's concerts became a favorite of the oil region. The band experienced highs and lows in membership and audience. Events like the Civil War, the decline of oil, the Great Depression, and the American slump after WWII caused problems for the band, but it has always rebounded. The Franklin Silver Cornet Band is currently in its 153rd year.

Peter Greene, a member of the band, chronicles the history of the band in a book titled *Musical Service: The Life and Times of the Franklin Silver Cornet Band*, published in 2006.

Oil Fever: Music of the Pennsylvania Oil Boom - Music CD

Drake Well Museum in Titusville, Pennsylvania has a collection of sheet music of twelve oil songs – a collection that is larger than the collection of oil music at the Library of Congress. This prized collection, dating back to the 1860s, has been cared for and studied by local historians. The collection of sheet music has even been compiled into a book titled *Oil Fever Songbook* by Margaret Anne Mong.

A recording was made in 2005 of the Drake Well Museum's collection of twelve songs by the Franklin High School Black Knight Band of Franklin, Pennsylvania. Under the direction of Steve Johnson, the band played and John McConnell sang the oil tunes. The Black Knight Band spent a considerable amount of time researching, practicing, and recording the oil tunes.

Oil Fever Songbook compiled by Margaret Anne Mong

American Petroleum Polka, composed by J. J. Watson, 1864

Coal Oil Tommy (from *The Lottery of Life*), words by John Brougham, music by Alfred Lee, 1865

Crazy on Oil, written and composed by C. Archer, 1865

Famous Oil Firms, words by E. Pluribus Oilem, composed by Petroleana, 1865

Have You Struck Ile?, words by Joseph B. Quinby, arranged by A. Speculator, 1865

Ile or Vay Down in Bennisylvany, composed by Hans Schmidt, 1865

I've Struck Ile, words and music by Frank Wilder, 1865

Oil Fever Galop, by Carlo Detta, 1865

Oil on the Brain, words and music by "Eastburn" or Joseph E. Winner, 1864

PA has Struck Ile, written and composed by C. Archer, 1865

Petroleum Court Dance, music by H. C. Watson, 1865

Petroleum Galop, by F. B. Helmsmüller, 1865