

150 YEARS OF FARMING FOR OIL

The very first oil boom began in 1858 when James Miller Williams dug a shallow well on his property in Black Creek, Ontario, later to be renamed Oil Springs. When oil bubbled to the surface, he made history by turning his discovery into the first commercially successful oil well in the world.

Dozens after him followed to punch holes in the ground in hopes of finding their fortune. Unfortunately, peak production for Oil Springs hit in 1862 and then began to drop off. Four years later, neighbouring town Petrolia struck oil and became Canada's oil capital. Almost overnight Petrolia became dotted with hurriedly built shacks that eventually made way for opulent homes in the boom days. Times were good but they didn't last. By 1908, salt water began to flood the Petrolia wells putting an end to the boom days in the area. As a result, many oil pioneers had no choice but to return to the plow.

The hamlet of Oil Springs, nevertheless, persevered. Families continued to produce oil despite reports that the crude was all but gone and the land had been rendered worthless after years of carelessness and contamination. The verdict from a 1949 issue of the *Imperial Oil Review* was grim. "There has been no farming here since the wells first came into production... nor will there ever be," wrote the *Review*. The oil wells had "nearly come to the end of their usefulness. Now they produce so little crude that when a serious breakdown occurs at a pump, the well is more likely to be abandoned than repaired."

And yet, through generations of hard times, some families stubbornly kept the faith that this historic village would have its day. The longest-standing are the Fairbanks, an oil-producing family who supplied fuel to Imperial even before the company was incorporated in 1880.

"We are the oldest supplier to Imperial

Oil," says Charles Fairbank III from his hardware store in Petrolia. "We've been pumping oil longer than anyone in the world as a family."

The family's oil legacy started with his great-grandfather, John Henry Fairbank, an entrepreneur and land surveyor who was too independent minded to join his friends

abandoned some 50 years before. With a metal detector in hand, he went out and found several wells, cleared the brush around them, and then re-established production.

His land is much different than it was in 1949. Today, it's covered with green grass and trees, jerker-line wells and sheep that operate better than any lawnmower,

jumping the jerker lines to keep the grass short. He describes his 263-hectare property as "a small scale oil farm that's in harmony with nature."

Using the same technology his great-grandfather invented, Fairbank produces about 24,000 barrels of oil per year from his 350 wells. In fact, his field is every bit as much a memorial to the old days as it is an operating oil field.

He describes himself as a "historic oil producer" and a man who's "passionate

about the history of the wells." So passionate in fact, that he and his wife, Pat McGee, joked that they should have had "for boom or for bust" as wedding vows.

It's unclear just how much time is left for properties in the area to continue to produce. Fairbank believes that 10 million barrels of oil have already been produced in Oil Springs and as much as 1.2 million may still remain. Even if this is true, the entire Fairbank annual production could be used up by the world in 24 seconds.

But if the area isn't rich in oil, it's definitely rich in history. That's why this 150th anniversary is so important, perhaps important enough to capture the world's attention. Fairbank and others are working to have the area – while it's still operational – recognized as a world heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It would be one of a handful of industrial sites on the organization's list.

Whether their bid is successful is anyone's guess, but if we've learned anything from history it's this: never underestimate "the little guy." – Catherine Teasdale ■



Charles Fairbank III

at the Imperial Oil Company and become a refiner; he was determined to be an "oilman." And, in the early days, his logic made sense. In 1880, when Canada's oil production was about 400,000 barrels per year, Fairbank's company was the largest oil producer in the country.

He was also the inventor of the jerker-line system of pumping oil, which involves running multiple wells from a central steam engine rather than powering the wells individually. It was a simple but efficient invention that caught on and spread around the world.

Despite the eventual loss in standing for Fairbank Oil the company always kept good relations with Imperial Oil. Fairbank III recalls a time when his father dropped in at Imperial's former head office on Church Street in Toronto to discuss prices with the then vice-president Alex McQueen: "When the prices were too low for local producers, Imperial would help out. It wasn't an accommodation you'd expect for the little guy."

Now Fairbank is determined to keep the family business alive. In the '90s, he bought adjacent properties with wells that had been