

Looking Back On the Lakeview Gusher Of 1910

NPR.com, 8-4-10

While the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is the largest maritime leak in history, it is not the largest spill on land. That honor goes to the Lakeview gusher of 1910 in California, where the spill of 9 million barrels of oil formed a lake and became a tourist attraction. NPR's Melissa Block talked to Agnes Hardt of the West Kern Oil Museum in Taft, Calif.

MICHELE NORRIS, host: Yesterday on the program, we ran through some of the numbers that illustrate the extent of the Gulf oil spill. We included the new government estimate that 4.9 million barrels of oil spewed from the broken well, and we said there had been no accidental oil spills in history larger than this one.

Well, that led listener Demissa Lee(ph) of Christiana, Tennessee, to wonder, was there ever a large purposeful oil spill?

MELISSA BLOCK, host: The distinction drawn there is with the oil deliberately released during the first Gulf War, when Iraqi troops set fire to Kuwaiti oil wells and opened the valves on pipelines. It's estimated five to 10 million barrels of oil were spilled then.

But some of you also wrote to point out that there is another accidental oil spill in U.S. history that tops the Gulf spill. Ted Flanagan(ph) of Bandera, Texas, writes: The Lakeview Gusher at Midway-Sunset Field, California, blew out for 18 months in 1910 to 1911, with a total volume of 9 million barrels.

Well, that letter has prompted us to call the West Kern Oil Museum in Taft, California, to find out more. Agnes Hardt is a docent there. Welcome to the program.

AGNES HARDT (Docent, West Kern Oil Museum): Thank you.

BLOCK: Take us back, if you would, 100 years ago, back to March of 1910. Drillers, I gather, were looking for oil about 100 miles north of Los Angeles. What happened when they hit it?

HARDT: Well, so they had been drilling for quite a while in this well, and there was a piece of equipment stuck down in the well. It was called a bailer. And when they tried jerking on that bailer to get it loose, the first couple of times, they brought it up, they noticed that there was oil dripping off the bottom of it, and that really shouldn't have been there. And so they dropped it a few more times, and then they began to hear this roar down in the ground. And they pulled the bailer out, and they started running. And the rest is history. The oil just kept on going.

BLOCK: What are the descriptions you've seen about how high up that oil was gushing?

HARDT: Yes, about 200 feet. The - most of the wooden derricks in those days were 106 feet. This one wasn't quite that tall. It was 76 or 78 feet. But they did estimate that the oil was going well over 200 feet in the air.

BLOCK: Wow. What did they do, finally, to try to contain all this oil that was gushing from this well?

HARDT: They - I think, at first, they thought they were all going to be millionaires. They were very, very excited. But it didn't take them very long to realize that if they didn't contain it in some way, this oil was all running downhill towards Buena Vista Lake, which was about eight miles away, all downhill. And the water in Buena Vista Lake was used for irrigation, and so they knew that they had to do something to stop the oil. So they got as many men as they could together, and they built these berms to stop the oil from going down the little canyons that led to the lake. And in doing that, they created 20 catch basins, or sumps, that covered 60 acres.

BLOCK: I've read, Ms. Hardt, that this gusher in Lakeview, California, became a real tourist attraction, people coming out to see it.

HARDT: Yes, it was. They ran one train every day just for tourists. The only trouble was that if the wind happened to be blowing towards the train, it would blow the oil because oil is very light. And if the wind happened to be blowing towards the train, the train was covered in oil, you couldn't see through the windows. And if you stepped out of the train, then you got covered in oil.

BLOCK: Oh, my.

HARDT: But I guess they understood that when they came out, so they would have a souvenir to take back with them because their clothes would be covered in oil.

BLOCK: Yeah, I bet. Well, it kept gushing for, as we said, 18 months -544 days. What happened? How did it stop?

HARDT: It finally caved in way down in the well itself and died on its own. They had nothing to do with it. It died really as suddenly as it had started.

BLOCK: And somebody made a whole lot of money, I guess.

HARDT: Well, no.

BLOCK: No?

HARDT: Because the price of oil, because there was so much oil ready to go to market all at one time, the price dropped to at least half of what it had been getting at the time. Nobody made any money.

BLOCK: Well, when you think about that gusher in California in 1910, it doesn't quite fit the description of a spill. I mean, this was not -this was providential, maybe, but no accident.

HARDT: No, it was not. No one did anything wrong. Nobody made a mistake or anything. It just happened, and I'm sure it happened because it was such a new industry. They didn't have blowout preventers. They didn't have the equipment to have done anything about it.

And we here have never thought of it as a catastrophe. It just proved that there was a lot of oil in the ground here, and after that was when this area really boomed. No, we have never thought of it as a bad thing. It was something to be celebrated.

BLOCK: Well, Agnes Hardt, thanks for telling us about it.

HARDT: Oh, you're very welcome.