

BARTLES DUG DEEP FOR BLACK GOLD

Men who only yesterday were dirt poor suddenly found themselves wealthy beyond their dreams . . . while other men, suddenly finding their neighbors unbelievably rich and their own red clay soil still worthless, placed shaky pistols to their heads and blew their brains out . . .

by Sam Henderson

INDIAN TRADER JAKE BARTLES came bursting through the door of his store and mill, whoopeeing at the top of his lungs. "We've got it!" he shouted, jarring awake his dozing clerks.

"Got what?"

"Oil!" Jake shouted. "Black mucky oil!"

In this dramatic fashion Jake Bartles in 1897 announced his intention of bringing oil to the surface of Oklahoma. For some months he had had geologists at work and they had discovered that beneath the dry, windswept, burning soil lay a restless, surging sea of wealth.

"YES-SIRREE!" Cap'n Jake Bartles shouted awakening probably the entire Indian Territory. "She's there and we're gonna bring 'er to the surface. Jest you wait 'n' see. I've right now got men settin' up a

drill on the west bank of the Caney River in downtown Bartlesville."

Few if any among Jake's fellow pioneers believed in this absurd and ridiculous dream. The more thoughtful of his friends even tried to reason with him.

"Jake," they told him, "this is crazy."

"It's not," Bartles insisted. "Geology is these men's business. They're trained to know the soil and what lies beneath it. They say there's oil under this property and so there must be!"

"What if there is? It couldn't be transported. We have no railroad. How would you get it carried back East?"

"I'll take care of that when the time comes. Just leave everything to me."

"We've already taken certain of your objectives into our hands. We've contacted the offices of all the major railroads. They have all refused to lay rails through Bartlesville. You'll just be wasting your time and money."

"We'll see," Jake smiled. "We'll see."

Bartles' activities, during the next few weeks, set the entire frontier to laughing. He told some of his men off to erect a drill, others to make kegs and barrels. He, himself, ordered his two larger store buildings made vacant. One, he said, would house the Bartles Oil Company; the other was reserved for the Cherokee-Delaware Oil Company.

"Two companies are enough to start," he said. "Later on, when the boom gets going good, I'll organize others."

As had happened so many times in the past, the frontier folk began enjoying a big belly laugh at Jake's expense.

"This," they said, "is jest another of Bartles' damn fool ideas."

Then, suddenly they realized that none of Cap'n Bartles' previous fool ideas had failed to bear fruit. Much as they hated to admit it, he had accomplished the surprising and unforeseen before.



Bartles' store and old mill; Bartlesville.

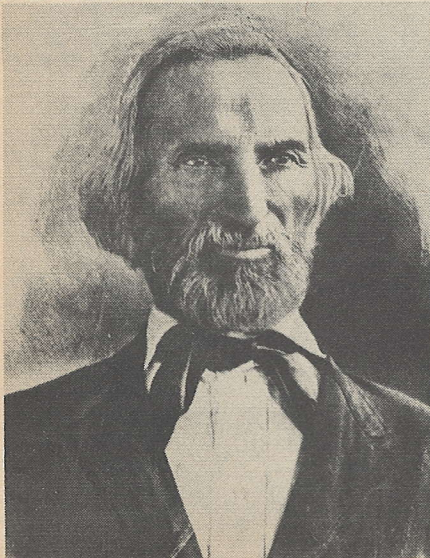
At a time when very few streets even in the civilized east were electrically lit, he had brought in a dynamo and established the first power plant in what is now Oklahoma. His supposed foolishness in stringing the first telephone lines across what is now Oklahoma had provided the frontier with its first link with civilization. Even before wheat was sown in the Caney River Valley he had put into operation the Indian Territory's first roller process flouring mill. Then, defying the disbelief of all who owned property there, he had proved that area to be what it remains even today—one of the richest wheat producing sections in the entire world. (Bartles himself, raised 45000 bushels there in 1894.) And now, by bringing in Oklahoma's first oil well, he was about to perform the miracle of miracles—he was about to transform the most worthless of American wastelands into a vista of lush plenty.

At high noon, April 15, 1897, a huge crowd gathered on the west bank of the Caney River. A few minutes later they heard a low roaring sound beneath the earth. A low roaring sound growing louder and louder—and then a black spurt of oil shooting skyward.

"Whoopee!" Jake shouted. "That's it! That's what I told ye about. The stuff that's a gonna make Oklahoma the richest land in the world. Whoopee . . ."

"All right," said the calm ones, the sensible ones. "You've got an oil well. It's

Photo: Oklahoma Hist. Soc.



Preacher Charles Journeycake.