



Published August 26, 2011  
INDUSTRY NEWS

## Past practice - Fernie Derrick restoration

James Waterman  
Staff Writer

About one hundred years ago, aspiring oilmen tried their luck in the environs of Akamina Creek and Sage Creek in the Flathead River Valley of southeast British Columbia. They didn't discover any commercial quantities of oil during the period from 1907 to 1930, but the remnants from the rigs they used to drill 23 wells still persist today, now greeting travelers as they enter the nearby town of Fernie on Highway 3.

It is the last standing wooden oil derrick in B.C.

"Some of the parts came from Oil City over there in Waterton," said Alex Miller, who has been involved with the most recent Fernie Derrick Society initiative to restore the rig, a project that has been assisted by funding from the oil and gas industry sponsored Science and Community Environmental Knowledge (SCEK) Fund.

Oil City, Alberta, the home to the first producing oil well in western Canada, is now situated in Waterton Lakes National Park, just across the Alberta-B.C. border from the Flathead River Valley region. Exploration in Oil City dates back to 1891. Drilling really began in earnest ten years later, only to see those wells abandoned in 1906.

"And then [those parts] sort of migrated over when they were doing the drilling in B.C. in the twenties," Miller added. "So, what we have there is basically components from a number of the derricks that were used out on the Flathead."

Miller wasn't involved in the first rebuild of the wooden derrick in 1984, when a number of components from the old rigs also found their way to Heritage Park in Calgary.

"At Heritage Park, there's actually an operational wooden derrick drilling rig that got put together in the eighties using the metal components that were salvaged from the Flathead," said Miller. "The reason the components stayed [in Flathead Valley] is because they were remote enough that the scrap metal guys didn't get them in the war. Most of that stuff, anything on the prairies, any metal, got scrounged up, because it was easy to get to."

For years, the only people really aware of the existence of those old parts were backcountry explorers like hunters and fishermen.

“Shell was doing some exploration,” said Miller, beginning to explain how those parts finally wound up in Fernie. “And, actually, Shell drilled a lot in this area. . . . And Chevron was in this area too, trying to find commercial quantities. And nobody ever did. The wells are sitting around and they’re capped. And I’m assuming they never did [find commercial quantities of oil], because they never came back.”

Shell didn’t find oil, but they did find the remains of the old rigs, and decided to help bring them into Fernie.

“When they put the rig up, I was living here,” recalled Mary Guiliano, who is virtually a lifetime Fernie resident. “And that was something that the [city] council of the day decided would be a good thing, because it was donated to the city. And they thought it would be a good tourist attraction. So, they put it up, they put a big fence around it, and promptly forgot it.”

“So,” she continued, “in the 21 years that it was sitting there, it was in the midst of tall grasses, rust – you know, it was total neglect.”

The derrick shares a piece of property that includes the building that houses the local Chamber of Commerce, which had a new manager – whose office had a window directly facing the rig – at a time when the site had already suffered those years of neglect.

“It looked pretty awful,” Guiliano admitted, “because it did have this huge wire fence. You know, that ugly mesh wire fence. And it had tall grasses. Everything had rusted.”

So, the Chamber of Commerce was insisting that the derrick be torn down, but Guiliano, a city councillor both then and now, was adamantly opposed to the idea.

“I said, ‘No! That is a big part of British Columbia history. And it’s not going to go anywhere,’” she said.

A three-year struggle ensued, culminating in an ultimatum from the Chamber of Commerce, demanding that the rig finally be removed.

“So, I got myself a committee,” said Guiliano. “We formed a society. And after many presentations to council, we were given the go ahead by council in a motion to take over the derrick and the rehabilitation of the site. And that’s what we did. I managed to get some funding from a few different sources. And we tore down the fence. We trimmed bushes. We moved all kinds of things. We secured the structure.”

“We had an engineer check the rig out,” added Miller. “John Turcasso, one of the local engineers, donated his services . . . He donated his services to do an assessment and make sure that it was structurally sound. And he said it’s in excellent shape.”

Miller became involved in preserving the derrick when he heard the news that some members of the community were eager to tear it down.

“I was out of Red Deer,” he said. “I retired down here about five years ago. And that was a real neat landmark when we come into town. So, I got involved.”

“We secured any loose ends that needed to be tightened up,” Guiliano continued. “That’s where Alex came in because he has a business and he had all kinds of machinery and equipment where he was able to dig out posts and remove bushes and [do] things you didn’t want to do by hand. And a work party was organized a few times. And the whole area was cleaned up. The committee members tore down some of the wood platform that was around the derrick and re-did it. Put up a new railing. Put up new stairs.”

The site was originally constructed to appear as though it was actually an operating oil derrick, which means that it occupied a considerable amount of space on the property and elements such as the engine were directly on the ground, allowing them to rust. So, as part of the restoration, those parts were moved closer to the rig and placed on new cement pads. Various other artifacts were also restored. Now the Fernie Derrick Society is only waiting on racks on which to display those pieces, which should mark the end of the restoration process this fall. If they can secure the funding, they would also like to print brochures.

The exhibit now features signage to inform visitors about the history of the derrick and is equipped with spotlights inside the structure so the rig is clearly visible at night.

“We were hoping to have lights put on the perimeter,” said Guiliano. “Because there’s guy wires holding this on all four sides, we couldn’t get the fire department engine to go close enough to have anybody climb up. And we couldn’t get any electricians who were willing to risk life and limb to go and do the work. But the spotlights work really well because they still light it. And then, of course, we put a flag up on top. So, it’s looking pretty nice, pretty neat now.”

“And,” she added, “I know that as soon as we took down that fence and cleaned it up and people were able to go near it, it instantly became more appealing. And we have been told by the Chamber of Commerce that many people stop and read and want to know more. There’s a miniature model of it inside the Chamber that was built at the same time as this big one was put up.”

Guiliano is very grateful that SCEK was willing to contribute funding to the project, as it likely wouldn’t have been completed without their support.

“It’s amazing how construction costs are so high even for just cement,” she said. “You know, just the basics, right? So, they came through for us. And they actually said they would support us to the tune of \$23,000. And then I got funding from some oil companies and from some private donations. And we got a lot of volunteer help. We actually had BP give us a work party twice. And they probably would have given us a lot more financial help. I don’t know if you’re aware, but down here in Fernie, we have a very strong environmental group who hated BP with a passion. And BP was a little bit worried that they would look like they were trying to buy

favouritism from the community. So, they quietly helped us out by giving us a small amount of funding and sending a work party, which we really appreciated.”

The derrick has become an important local landmark for the community.

“It’s been a real positive thing for the tourism now,” said Miller.

“It’s part of B.C.’s history,” he added. “And it’s the only one standing. And the reality is, today, unless somebody comes along with a big grant or something like that, probably nobody’s going to build another wooden drilling rig in British Columbia.”

“Obviously, most of the oil and gas activity’s up in northern B.C. now,” Miller concluded. “But it is part of our heritage.”

Miller remarked that it can also be a good way to show today’s generation of oilmen how the industry first began in western Canada.

“In the space of a lifetime,” he said, “we’ve gone from just pounding holes in the ground with a steam powered engine to drilling down horizontal and directional. The guys back then couldn’t even imagine.”

“The young guys today have a hard time imagining how the industry got started.”

“It is the history of the Flathead,” Guiliano echoed. “And we’re not that far from the Flathead.”

“And Fernie is surrounded by coal, right?” she continued. “But coal and oil and gas are not unrelated. I mean, this is part of our history. And even if although we don’t have oil here in our close vicinity – and we’re thankful enough that we have coal mining – it is still a part of British Columbia history.

“History is valuable. And I just believe that preserving history is a way to move forward in the future. Because unless you know where you came from and what your history is, really, I don’t know if you’re able to really move forward and progress as well as you could.”

A couple years ago, the old wooden derrick was central to the search for eight young snowmobilers who died that winter.

“They had a big search and rescue operation,” said Guiliano. “And it was carried out on the grounds of where the derrick was and out of the Chamber [of Commerce]. And people came with all kinds of media. And there was just all kinds of search and rescue people from all over. And it was said by all of them that as soon as they were told [to] come [to] the oil derrick, it was like a beacon for them. It was so very easy for them to find it.”

“That was the headquarters for the search and rescue operation,” she added. “And it just became iconic for everybody because they knew that’s where they could find the headquarters, that’s where they knew where to go.

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