

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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PIONEER OIL REFINERY

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by

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## PIONEER OIL REFINERY

The first commercial oil refinery in California was erected in Railroad Canyon, a half mile southeast of Newhall, in 1875, by the Star Oil Company, which was later merged with the Standard Oil Company of California. At the old plant in the San Fernando hills, the state's first crude oil was manufactured into kerosene and benzene. The refinery was operated at full capacity for several years. Later, as the industry expanded, improved methods and machinery replaced the first modes of refining oil. The original refinery was abandoned for more modernly equipped plants. Its machinery fell silent and for many years rusted into crumbling ruins. Just a half century after its erection, the Standard Oil Company restored the Pioneer Oil Refinery to its original appearance. With the land on which it stood it was converted into a park and permanent landmark commemorating the first location of one of California's foremost industries.

Newhall and the San Fernando hills have often been called "the cradle" of California's oil business. One of the most important of early oil discoveries in the state occurred in the San Fernando Range and the first commercial oil production in California was begun there. An account of the oil development in Los Angeles written in 1896 by

Industry Louis Salvator, architect of Austria, tells of the discovery of oil in the San Fernando district in 1868. 1

In a lone spot of the San Fernando Range about thirty-five miles from Los Angeles, oil was discovered in February, 1868, by Mexicans who, while out hunting bear, became thirsty and began to search for water. Finding a brook that emitted a strange odor of petroleum, they struck a match and it immediately ignited. Realizing of the importance of their discovery, one remained on the ground to establish possession while his partner hurried off to Los Angeles to inform some of the most influential citizens - among them General Andres Bico.... These men decided to go out and stake claims measuring 1,000 by 600 feet apiece in conformity with the mining laws and instruct the discoverers how to protect their claims.

The first claim, which was General Bico's holding, was called General Bico and was owned later by the Star Oil Company. Several companies were formed to work the newly discovered oil district, and of them the Star Oil works was the most important in the pioneer development period of the oil industry of California. The concern was organized chiefly through the efforts of S. S. Seefield of Pennsylvania, who later became president of the Star Oil Company of California.

The oil wells developed by the Star Oil Company in

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1. S. S. Seefield, March of Industry, 173-174.

the vicinity of Marshall and in Rice Canyon paid well. The refinery at Marshall was established to take care of the large amount of oil produced by them. As that was the day before the automobile, most of the oil was refined into kerosene. Gasoline, a lower grade of oil called "slop-oil," and a small amount of lubrication oil were also made.<sup>2</sup>

Old timers say that the Marshall refinery was well known for the high grade of its kerosene. The Los Angeles Times for November 3, 1930, quotes one of them:<sup>3</sup>

"When it was put into a lamp," one old timer stated, "it did not explode the lamp, because the refinery knew how to take out the explosive something which later was to be known as gasoline." This "explosive something," the paper adds, was always allowed to run off in waste pipes as useless.

After several years, the Pacific Oil Company was organized to take over the properties of the Star Oil Company and of two smaller concerns. The Marshall Refinery was enlarged and improved. It had a charging capacity of about three hundred barrels of crude oil a day. A two-inch cast iron pipe line to carry the oil by gravity was laid connect-

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2. Los Angeles Times, November 3, 1930.  
 3. Ibid., November 3, 1930.

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ing it with the wells in Pico Canyon. It was the first oil pipe line in the state. Another pipe line was laid from the Needy Gulch wells in Santa Clara County to the Southern Pacific Railroad line. A refinery, larger than the one at Nehalem, was built at Alameda. Oil from the Pico district was transported to the Alameda refinery by tank cars. In 1884-1885, the Mission Transfer Company built a four-inch pipe line which connected Pico Canyon with Ventura. From that time much of the oil from Pico Canyon was transported by steamer instead of rail to the new refinery at Alameda, and the Nehalem refinery was superseded by it. <sup>4</sup>

During the early and middle eighties, important developments took place in California's oil industry, as new discoveries were made in the Puente Hills, Whittier, and Wilmington along the coast north of Santa Barbara. At that time there were four important companies operating in California, and the Pacific Oil Company which had taken over the Star concern, was one of them. The Pacific worked mainly in Pico Canyon and the Nehalem district. Later the Standard Oil Company absorbed the Pacific properties with those of other smaller companies.

The refinery at Nehalem thus had an important place

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<sup>4</sup> A. S. Cleland, March of Industry, 179-178.

in the pioneer oil days of California. The company which built it became a part of one of the largest concerns operating in California. As the oil industry developed, new refineries were supplied by hundreds of wells. The old refinery in the San Fernando Hills became a tumble-down ruin, almost forgotten. Then, looking back over fifty years of growth and progress, the leaders in the oil industry remembered the pioneer plant. To commemorate its place in the early history of the industry, the officials of the Standard Oil Company of California conceived the idea of creating a landmark park out of the old refinery.

At considerable expense, the pioneer plant was restored in every detail to its former appearance. At dedication ceremonies on November 3, 1930, a bronze tablet was unveiled as a memorial to the late D. G. Scofield and his associates of the California Star Oil Works. Mrs. Rosemond D. Watson, granddaughter of Mr. Scofield, unveiled the tablet. I. B. Little, general superintendent of the producing department of the Standard Oil Company, was master of ceremonies. Other speakers were County Supervisor Sidney T. Graves, H. C. Hanna, refinery executive, and Walter Young who had been connected with the Pechell oil fields for forty years. Many prominent and interested persons, including

of places the numbered when the refinery was the first  
of plants of the kind, attended the collection. Another  
historic site had been removed and added to California's  
list of interesting landmarks.

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