

TAFT

The town of Taft has been at all its stages the logical outgrowth of the necessities of the Midway oil field, of which it is the business center. Although the first oil prospectors who entered Kern county from Coalinga overran and located the greater part of the Midway field, the lack of transportation facilities, water and fuel and the depth of the oil sands as compared to that in the older parts of the McKittrick and Sunset fields discouraged development. A map of the field published in 1901 shows but six oil wells, all in township 32-23. At that time 900 or 1000 feet was considered the limit of profitable drilling, whereas the big producers of the field in later years were brought in at twice that depth, or more.

In 1903 and thereabout, in the Midway field, occurred some of the bitterest contests over oil lands that have marked the history of the industry in the state, but the drop-in oil prices just after that period reduced the activity of the Midway operators almost to the vanishing point. As late as 1907 the production of the Midway field was only 134,174 barrels for the entire year, less than half what some of the later wells of the territory produced per well in a month.

But with the cleaning up of the surplus oil stocks of the state during 1907, interest turned again to the Midway field, and the train of events which resulted in the building of Taft began. Foreseeing that the possession of its own supply of fuel might someday be of great advantage, the Santa Fe railroad bought the extensive holdings of Chanslor & Canfield in the Midway field; the Standard Oil Company also began to acquire land in Midway — the first venture of the big concern into the field of production in this state — and the construction of the Standard pipe line from the Kern river field to Midway was begun. Under the name of the Sunset Western, the Sunset railroad was extended from Maricopa to a point a little northwest of the present townsite of Taft, and a side track for the unloading of lumber and oil well supplies were put in. In the winter of 1908-9 an excursion of Bakersfield people went by train to the end of the Sunset Western road and spent half an hour looking at the sights of the embryo metropolis of the Midway field. They consisted of two or three shacks and several acres of oil well casing and derrick timbers piled along the siding.

But when the town began to grow it lost no time. By the summer of 1909 it had ten or a dozen business houses and some 200 inhabitants, and in July of that year it was given a post office with H. A. Hopkins, one of the pioneer merchants, as postmaster. Less than two years later the population had been multiplied by ten, and the business had increased still faster.

But there were intervening vicissitudes. Before the railroad was built water had to be hauled from Buena Vista lake and cost \$8 per barrel. Afterward it was shipped by tank cars from East Bakersfield and retailed at fifty cents. The town was first built on the south side of the railroad track on land leased from the railroad on short tenure, and the architecture was of a correspondingly frail and temporary character. On October 22, 1909, at five o'clock in the morning a drunken man tried to light a distillate burner in a Chinese restaurant. He turned on the distillate and struck a match. The match went out, and he struck another. Meantime the distillate flowed out of the stove and through a hole in the floor. The second match started the fire. There was an explosion, and in an hour and a half the business street of the little Midway town was in ashes. There was no such thing as a fire department, and the total supply of water in the town at the time was estimated at

ten gallons. Some of the losers by the fire were Evans & Parish, general merchants; W. L. Alvord, confectioner; Hahn & Krull, furniture dealers; Max Tupper, stationer; Fred O'Brien, pool hall and barber shop; Harry A. Hopkins, general merchant and postmaster; S. C. Burchard, butcher; James & Dooley, clothing merchants; Dr. Summers, and two or three others.

The remainder of the town was composed of tents, tent houses and shacks of the lightest construction. The railroad company in July had notified its lessees on the south side of the track that all that ground was needed for sidings, and had platted a townsite on the north side of the track where lots were offered for sale outright, except with provisions in the deed reserving the right to drill for oil and forbidding the sale of liquor.

About the same time J. W. Jameson platted a townsite on the south side of the railroad a little distance from the tracks on section 24, and a sharp contest arose over the location of the post office. The railroad company won the post office and most of the business houses, although enough of the latter located on the Jameson townsite to make quite a showing and to keep the ultimate result of the rivalry between the two locations in doubt for a considerable time.

Up to this time the railroad had called the new town Moro, but as there was an express office in San Luis Obispo county by that name an "n" was added to the end of the name of the Midway town. But there was a Moron in Colorado, and the postal authorities objected to duplicating the name in California, as the abbreviations used for the two states look so much alike.

After many weeks of debate and the vigorous rejection of several suggested names, Postmaster Hopkins, sitting in the office of Postmaster R. A. Edmonds in Bakersfield one day, happened to raise his eyes to a portrait of the president which hung above the desk. "Let's call it Taft," said Hopkins to Edmonds, and the suggestion finally prevailed, so far as the post office was concerned, although the railroad still clung to the name of Moron for its station.

Up to the end of 1909 neither of the rival towns had made much progress, but with the beginning of 1910 both began to forge ahead with a vigor and enterprise that renewed the doubt as to which would gain the supremacy. But in September, 1910, the Jameson townsite was swept by fire, and the setback which it thus received put its rival hopelessly in the lead.

A movement for the incorporation of Taft was started in April or May, 1910, and on November 8th of that year, at an election called by the county supervisors, the proposition carried by a rousing vote, and the following officers were elected: Trustees, H. W. Blaisdell, H. A. Hopkins, E. L. Burnham, J. W. Ragesdale and J. P. Dooley; marshal, E. G. Wood; clerk, Dr. Fred Bolstad. The trustees appointed T. J. O'Boyle recorder, and Fred Seybolt city attorney.

The Taft Public Utilities Company, the first corporation formed to serve the public in the new town, was incorporated in the fall of 1910. It shipped water from East Bakersfield by tank cars, pumped it to a couple of 1200-barrel tanks and delivered it thence by gravity to the consumers. On February 1, 1911, the company's business and distributing system was sold to the Consumers' Water Company, a concern controlled by stockholders of the Western Water Company, which pumps water through a pipe line from wells located close to Buena Vista lake in the trough of the valley.

The city is supplied with gas from the natural gas wells in the Buena Vista hills, and with electricity by the San Joaquin Light & Power Corporation, whose transmission lines run through all the West Side fields.

In November, 1912, the town of Taft voted bonds in the sum of \$41,000 for the construction of a sewer and a system of water mains for fire protection. The sewer was completed in June, 1913, and the fire mains and hydrants were put into service shortly thereafter. The city built a concrete jail at a cost of \$1650 in 1911, and in the summer of 1913 completed a new \$20,000 grammar school building. The concrete building used as a post-office was built by popular subscription, and free sites were offered to the city for a school building and to the first church that would erect a house of worship. The Catholics were the first to accept the latter offer.

At the present time [1914] Taft is a well-built little city of about 3,000 people; has a good percentage of brick and concrete buildings; is well supplied with public utilities, as has been seen ; has a daily paper, The Midway Driller, and a weekly oil paper, The Petroleum Reporter, edited by members of the Petroleum Club. Besides the Sunset Western railroad which connects it with Maricopa and Bakersfield, it has an auto stage line running to McKittrick, and is promised another running to Bakersfield. Within the last few weeks announcement has been made that an electric railroad will be built from Los Angeles through the Tejon pass and thence west and northwest through the Sunset, Midway and McKittrick fields. With all these facilities and with the rich and steadily increasing oil field about it, the future of Taft as this history is closed is very bright [1914].