

TRANSLAKE NO. 3

- by Capt. Gerry Ouderkirk -

It has been over 90 years since the first natural gas well was drilled in the bed of Lake Erie. The first wells were drilled by steam-powered, cable-driven rigs which were hauled out onto the ice. The first well drilled on open water came in 1910. Modern commercial drilling began in the late 1950s and, since then, over 2,500 wells have been drilled on the Canadian side of the lakes. Currently, 550 operating wells produce 30 million cubic feet of natural gas each day.

The big player on Lake Erie in the late 1950s was Consolidated West Petroleum Ltd., a Calgary-based firm, which held drilling leases on almost 13,000 acres of Lake Erie bottom off Tilbury, in Kent County, Ontario. They held almost 40,000 additional underwater acres jointly with Imperial Oil Ltd. off Howard Township, about 30 miles east of their leases. Between 1943 and 1958, Con-West had completed 46 gas wells, which were between one and four and a half miles from shore. The gas from these wells was sold to the Union Gas Company under long-term contract. Underwater Gas Developers Ltd., of Toronto, was a wholly-owned subsidiary of Con-West. In 1958 they owned eight portable gas-drilling platforms.

Another participant was Place Gas & Oil Co. Ltd., which later became Place Resources Ltd. This company was bought by Pembina Resources Ltd., of Calgary, and that company subsequently was acquired by its current owner, Talisman Energy Ltd., of Calgary.

A third firm, Long Point Gas & Oil Company, and its subsidiary, Translake Drilling Limited, of Toronto, was a fairly new firm in 1958. It ordered three almost similar gas-drilling jack-up rigs built that year. The first, TRANSLAKE NO. 1 (C.311443), was built by E. B. Magee Ltd., of Port Colborne. It was designed to drill in depths up to 40 feet. The construction of the following two rigs was contracted to the firm of Russel-Hipwell Engines Ltd., of Owen Sound. TRANSLAKE NO. 2 (C.189910) was slightly smaller (43 g.t.) than TRANSLAKE NO. 3 (55.96 g.t.). The NO. 2 rig was designed to drill in depths up to 50 feet of water. It was launched successfully and was operational by the time its sistership was launched, and although the NO. 2 rig was a success, NO. 3 met with disaster.

Built to the design and specifications of Patrick S. Bazett, President of Long Point Gas & Oil Limited, and Douglas B. Bruce and Associates, a leading firm of Toronto consulting engineers, the NO. 3 rig was capable of drilling in water up to 75 feet deep. The rigs weighed about 300 tons overall, and were the first units of this type built by Russel-Hipwell. The six weeks of fabrication provided work for more than 25 men during the manufacture of the various components for the rig.

The drilling rig was basically three sections: a triangular drill platform roughly 50 feet long on each side, a similar underwater truss section, and spuds (or legs and feet). Each of the spuds was attached and connected underwater by divers working at depths varying between 10 and 25 feet, with a surface crew of about 10 men in contact by telephone. The rigs had to be towed to a point in Owen Sound harbour just north of the Great Lakes Elevator for final assembly because water at the Russel-Hipwell slip was not deep enough to attach the tanks and feet. Fully assembled, each rig had a draft of 24 feet.

The truss section under the barge platform also was assembled at the elevator. Diver Tom Ayers, an employee of Translake Drilling, was the principal assembler, connecting and matching the leg units and truss sections.

Six hydraulically operated spuds, placed on 44-foot centres, were used to lower and raise the drilling platform. Twelve six-inch diameter cylinders, each operating at 1,300 p.s.i., drove the spuds. The rig was powered for its services (air, water and hydraulic pressure) by a 27 h.p. Lister diesel en-