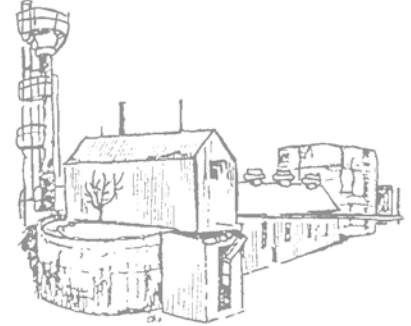

OIL SANDS PIONEERS: BITUMOUNT HISTORIC SITE

In 1922, Robert C. Fitzsimmons, a former farmer and businessman, arrived in Fort McMurray to make his fortune from the "huge pools of oil" in the Athabasca deposit. In 1923, he took over the Alcan Oil Company and acquired its lease in Townships 96 and 97, Range 40, approximately 90 km (65 miles) north of Fort McMurray. He renamed the site **Bitumount**, and started drilling explorations there.



On August 12, 1927, Fitzsimmons formed the **International Bitumen Company Ltd. (I.B.C.)**. He continued to drill on the lease looking for the ever-elusive pools of oil that never appeared. Discouraged by the results of conventional drilling, he turned to mining and extraction techniques. In 1930, he built a small hot-water separation plant on the site. It was a simple design based on Dr. Karl Clark's experimental plant located on the Clearwater River. The oil sand was shovelled into a tank, mixed with hot water, then fed into a second separation tank where the bitumen froth was skimmed off and the sand tailings were removed manually. It was a labour-intensive, primitive, small-scale operation. The seven-man crew at Bitumount produced about 300 barrels of bitumen during the summer months of 1930.

The bitumen produced at Bitumount was shipped to Waterways by barge, then to Edmonton by rail. The Marshall-Wells hardware store chain distributed the products. Most of it was used for waterproofing roofs, but the prospectus for the International Bitumen Company listed almost 50 other uses for bitumen. These included: fuels, lubrication oils, printers' ink, medicines, rust and acid-proof paints, fireproof roofing, street paving, patent leather, and fence post preservatives. According to the I.B.C.'s slogan, bitumen was "Nature's Supreme Gift to Industry."

Investment funds were a constant problem for Fitzsimmons. While his company had many shareholders, the capital he raised never met all his expenses. By 1932, he had spent over \$200,000 at his Bitumount site. Eventually, his sources of capital funds ran dry and the plant did not operate between 1932 and 1937. In 1936, Fitzsimmons attempted to get the plant operating again. He hired Harry Everard, an experienced oil engineer, to build an oil refinery and reconstruct the separation plant. It took a year for the separation plant to become operational, so the refinery was only able to work at one-third of its capacity. In September 1937, Everard closed the plant, claiming that he and his co-workers had not received payment for their work. Fitzsimmons replaced Everard with Elmer Adkins, an engineering graduate from the University of Alberta, who had worked at Max Ball's Abasand Oils Ltd. company. Between January and June 1938, Adkins worked to rebuild the separation plant and the company started to produce again.

By the end of 1938, Fitzsimmons had exhausted all his sources of capital, and left the country to avoid his creditors. In 1941 he was forced to sell the company to Lloyd Champion, a Montreal entrepreneur and financier who renamed it **Oil Sands Limited**.

BITUMOUNT HISTORIC SITE, Continued:

As President of Oil Sands Ltd., Champion retained Fitzsimmons in an advisory capacity at the plant site until 1944. For two years, Champion tried unsuccessfully to raise private capital and gain government contracts as a supplier of petroleum products. He submitted a proposal to the provincial government to join his company in a business partnership. The provincial Minister of Lands and Mines hired Dr. Karl Clark to evaluate Champion's proposal. Clark recommended a joint public-private venture for the construction of an experimental separation plant at Bitumount. The purpose of the project was to iron out the technical problems of the extraction process and to test the commercial feasibility of a large-scale venture. Despite the initial optimism of the provincial government, work proceeded slowly on the project. There were numerous problems and cost over-runs, and Champion found it increasingly difficult to finance the costly experiment. In November 1948, the new plant became the sole property of the provincial government.

In 1955, the provincial government sold the Bitumount plant complex to CanAmera Oil Sands Development Ltd. for \$180,000. CanAmera installed new Coulson separators in the separation plant.

In 1957, CanAmera sold the Bitumount plant to Royalite Oil Company for \$180,000 plus royalties. In 1958, Royalite closed down operations at Bitumount. In 1969, Royalite merged with Gulf Oil Company Limited.

In 1974, Bitumount was declared a Provincial Historic Site, and is currently managed by Alberta Community Development. Access is prohibited due to the many hazards on the site and to ensure its long-term preservation.

The International Bitumen Company was the **first** commercial oil sands separation and refining operation to be established, despite many problems. Lack of capital, lack of markets, and lack of effective industrial machinery all plagued the I.B.C., as they did frontier resource developments everywhere. But the efforts of small private inventors like Mr. Fitzsimmons in the 1920's and '30's have resulted in the full-scale development of the oil sands by major oil companies today.

Related Websites:

Ghosts of Industry: www.ghostsofindustry.com

Source:

O'Donnell, Cynthia. [Bitumount, A History of the Pioneers of the Oil Sands Industry](#), Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism.