

The cradle of Sarawak's oil industry and the Canadian 'foreign drillers'

By Terry Justin Dit

Miri is the second-largest city in Sarawak and has been recognised as home of the Malaysian oil and gas industry for well over a century. Oil was first struck on 10 October 1910 and Canada Hill, where the first well was located overlooking the small settlement at the time, was reportedly named in honour of a certain Mr. McAlpine, a Canadian employee of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company who was the field manager in charge of the drilling.

It is also speculated that the hill's name was attributed to the team of Canadian drillers working in the local oil industry in the early days of Miri. Either way, the name stuck and that is how this prominent limestone ridge and famous Miri landmark obtained its name.

Petrolia and Oil Springs are towns in southwestern Ontario, Canada. Both are part of Lambton County and surrounded by Enniskillen Township. Petrolia is popularly billed as 'Canada's Victorian Oil Town' and is often accredited with starting the oil industry in North America, a claim shared with the nearby town of Oil Springs.

It was also from the towns of Petrolia and Oil Springs that the Canadians who explored for oil in Miri are believed to have originated from. Due to them, Sarawak and Miri were put on the world map of oil exploration, and Miri was soon dubbed the 'Oil Town' of Sarawak.

In fact, men from Enniskillen provided skilled labour and technical expertise that were necessary for the development of the global petroleum industry. In the late 19th and early 20th Century in virtually all parts of the world where petroleum was discovered, whether it was in Java, Borneo, Sumatra, or Persia, Enniskillen drillers often provided the skilled labour and expertise.

With their knowledge of drilling, extracting, storing and transporting oil, these Canadian experts reached 86 countries before the Second World War. The very first batch Enniskillen's so-called 'foreign drillers' to venture into what was then the Dutch East Indies departed in December 1873, but it is uncertain when the first Canadian drillers arrived in large numbers in Miri, but it could not have been long after the first discovery of oil in 1910.

The men would usually sign contracts of one, three, and five year terms. Travelling to faraway lands to earn a living was never easy but these 'foreign drillers' persevered and made a name for themselves as hard working, reliable professionals.

Petrolia remained the top oil-producing centre in Canada and amongst the top producing regions in the world until 1894 when dwindling reserves brought its boom period to an end. As oil was found in other places around North America, many of the experienced oil hands and entrepreneurs from Ontario left for new opportunities.

Just as Canada had at one time produced skilled oil drillers and workers for the world's oil industry, so too has Sarawak. At one point in time, Miri supplied manpower and expertise to different oil fields all over the globe. The closest possible equivalent to Petrolia and Oil Springs in Miri would have to be in my humble opinion, Kampung Sealine, so called because of the 'Sea Loading Lines' which pumped oil from land to tankers moored offshore used to run through the village.

In the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, a sizeable proportion of Mirians who were in the oil industry, working on oil platforms, barges and fields all over the world probably came from Kampung Sealine. The majority of the villagers were people from the interior of Miri Division and from other parts of Sarawak, who were trying to create a better future for themselves and their families. Working the oil fields was lucrative and a rite of passage for many local men, just as it were for the men from Petrolia and Oil Springs.

But whatever prosperity the oil and gas industry had brought to Miri, all that came to an abrupt stop around 2014 to 2016 when a huge over-supply of oil flooded the world market. Between mid-2014 and early 2016, the global economy faced one of the largest oil price declines in modern history. The 70 per cent price drop during that period was one of the three biggest declines since the Second World War, and the longest lasting since the supply-driven collapse of 1986.

Large numbers of layoffs occurred, which affected oil and gas workers and their families. Whereas Petrolia and Oil Springs declined as 'oil towns' due to the end of the oil boom, the sad irony is that for Miri, the decline was due to a global glut in oil supply.

So what now for Miri? Oil prices will undoubtedly go up again, but for most people who at one time were reliant on the oil and gas industry as a means of making a lucrative living, the future remains uncertain. When the oil boom died down for Petrolia and Oil Springs, the oil men had to look elsewhere for employment. Kampung Sealine, where almost every family had family members working in the oil and gas industry, is now just a shadow of its former self. Most of the families who lived there in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s have moved elsewhere, to nearby Senadin and Permyjaya and other housing estates within Miri.

Miri has lost the opportunity to commercialise its oil exploration heritage and promote it as part of local and international tourism, unlike Petrolia. Beginning in the 1970s, a new economic and commercial base for the town was built around the commercialisation of heritage to promote tourism. Petrolia is now marketed as 'Canada's Victorian Oil Town'. The economic revitalisation of Petrolia around tourism emphasises the town's past as a nineteenth-century oil-boom town. The foreign drillers have been used to highlight the importance of Petrolia to the development of the global oil industry.

Miri had the Lutong Refinery, an installation which was of industrial historical importance, but that has since been dismantled. The 'foreign drillers' of Petrolia and Oil Springs and the oil and gas workers of Miri, although separated by time and distance, have a lot in common. All of them had the spirit of pioneering, hard work and the tenacity to carry on no matter how difficult things could be.

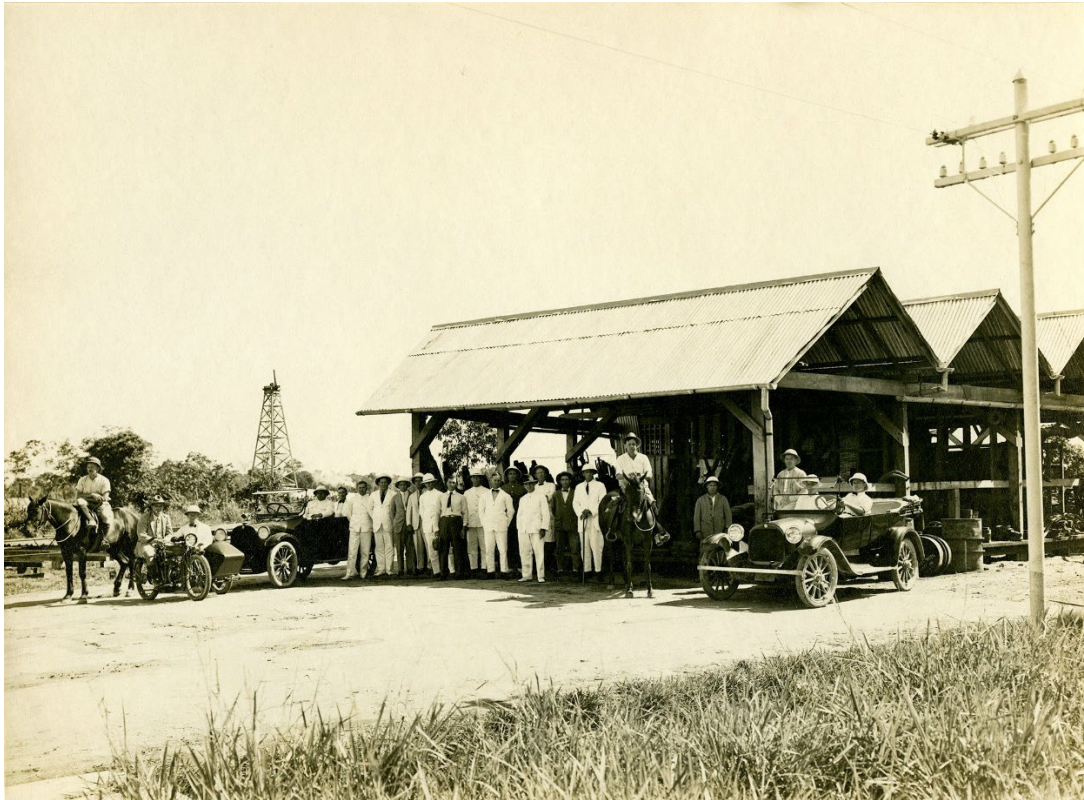
During periods when the oil markets declined, local drillers were left unemployed and this has been a common occurrence throughout the history of the industry. The importance of heritage preservation gives Petrolia an advantage, for the regional authorities there have leveraged its oil exploration past to rejuvenate the local economy, something which has not been done for Miri.

Similar to various forms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, the preservation of industrial heritage is essential as it serves as an important testament to the developmental milestones in the history of a nation. While we may regret the neglect of tangible industrial monuments in Miri, there is still a glimmer of hope in preserving aspects of its intangible heritage, which comes in the form of stories, photographs, and oral histories of its diverse citizens.

The act of gathering, conserving, and disseminating stories, photographs, and oral histories not only passes down knowledge from one generation to another, but also deepens our comprehension of the past by shedding light on personal experiences.

The true narrative of history is discovered within the lives of ordinary individuals who lived through it. It is in this area where probably institutions like Miri City Council, Pustaka Negeri Sarawak and educational institutions like Curtin University Malaysia can play a valuable role. We can only hope for the best for Miri, a small city that has contributed much to Sarawak and Malaysia.

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“Drillers at No.2 Godown, Miri”. Photograph taken by Stuart Nisbet, 1922.



“Oil Well No.23, Pujut. Stuart Nisbet with workers”. Photograph taken by Stuart Nisbet, 1922.



“The View of Miri”