

A concise history of the heady days of America's first oil boom, and the problems of financing, constructing, and operating the Union and Titusville Railroad—a road built with the single purpose of hauling that petroleum to refineries.

**Oil on the Pigtail:
The Union and Titusville Railroad 1865-1928**

By Rexford G. Wiggers

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OIL ON THE PIGTAIL

THE UNION AND TITUSVILLE RAILROAD
1865-1928

Rexford G. Wiggers

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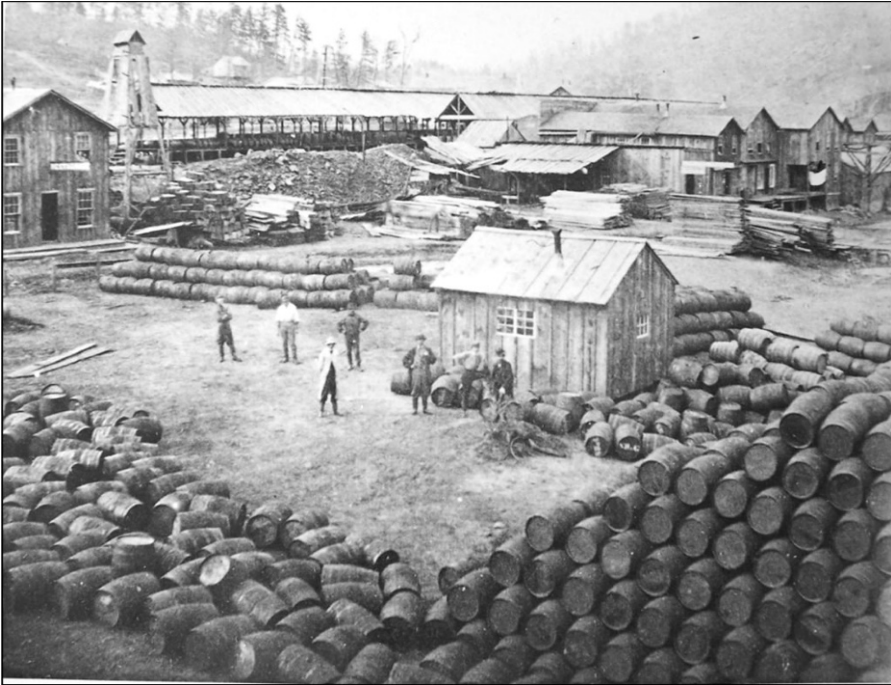
Chapter Three: Barrels, Horses, Wagons, and Water



Wooden Stave Barrel at Drake Well Museum and Park, PHMC, Photo by author

In short order after Drake's successful oil well, fortune-seekers drilled two more wells near Titusville, each striking oil and proving that a vast pool of petroleum lay underground in the Oil Creek valley. Predictably after these first few successful strikes, more oil wells were drilled in the Oil Creek Valley and petroleum was produced in heretofore unimaginable quantities. By the end of 1860, seventy-four wells were producing 1,165 barrels of oil a day, making the oil well producers scramble to find barrels for their well's output.^{xi}

Oil on the Pigtail



Courtesy, The Drake Well Museum, PHMC

The Coopers Storage Yard at the Shaffer Farm south of Titusville.

The common bulk liquid shipping container of the 1860s was the watertight wooden stave barrel. Holding some 40 to 50 gallons and weighing about 300 pounds when filled, the barrel was all “a man could reasonably wrestle” onto and off a wagon or railroad freight car.

The need for wooden stave barrels became acute in 1861. That year new oil wells were drilled deeper into the underlying sandstone of the Oil Creek valley striking petroleum under intense pressure. These deep wells produced a steady flow of oil without the need for pumps. The deep, flowing wells spouted oil from 300 to more than 3,000 barrels a day. By the end of 1861, two million barrels of petroleum had been extracted from the Oil Creek Valley, now

being called the "Oil Regions" of Pennsylvania. The water-tight wooden barrel was now in great demand in northwestern Pennsylvania. ^{xii}



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

A Flowing Pennsylvania Oil Well, named, Lady Hunter.

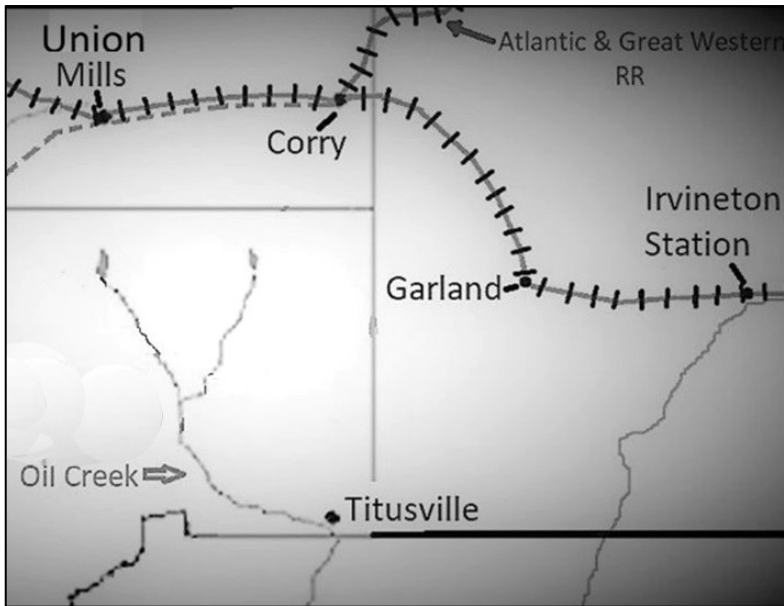
The barreled oil was taken to the nearest railway stations or riverports by horse drawn wagons. During the first year of oil production, most of the teamsters transporting oil by wagons were local farmers, who generally made two trips a week when not

engaged on their farms.⁶ As oil production soared, the need for more wagons brought teamsters from neighboring counties and neighboring states. Lured by lucrative wages, thousands of farmers and teamsters rushed to Titusville to transport oil.

Each teamster's two-horse wagon could haul, depending on the rig, the season, and the condition of the roadway, between five and nine barrels of petroleum. The teamsters, aware of their importance charged high rates for transport, as much as \$4.00 to \$5.00 a barrel, rates that at times cost more than the petroleum and barrels being hauled.^{xiii}

It was not uncommon to see oil caravans of a hundred or more wagons over a mile in length leaving the big flowing wells in route to the railroads or to riverports (Map 3.1). When wells were at peak production, 2,000 wagons a day could be seen leaving the Oil Creek Valley. Local residents often saw a solid line of wagons 24 miles long on the road leading from Titusville to the railroad station at Union Mills. By 1862, as many as 4,000 to 6,000 teamsters were employed transporting barreled petroleum out of the Oil Regions of northwest Pennsylvania.^{xiv}

⁶ Since a wagon was pulled by a two-horse team, the man driving the horses was known as a teamster.



Map by author

(Map 3.1) Barreled oil was delivered by teamsters to rail stations at Union Mills, Corry, Garland, and Irvineton Station. All four trackside communities were approximately 20 to 25 miles north of the Oil Regions.

Teamsters not only hauled petroleum out of the Oil Regions, but upon their return brought back barrels new and used, oil drilling tools, oil well equipment, building materials, and other necessities needed for human existence in the environs near Titusville. The wagons also ferried a vast horde of humanity, both male and female, looking to strike it rich in the oil (or entertainment) business. John Titus's former hamlet was now an oil boom town.⁷

⁷ The influx of people streaming into the Oil Regions caused the rapid growth of the population of Titusville, which obtained City status by 1866.

Oil on the Pigtail

Even though they were paid fabulous wages, to many teamsters it was not much money for the work. The cost of teaming was high for animals, wagons, and equipment. Often a teamster's wagon loaded with heavy oil barrels broke down in route, or exhausted horses collapsed in their traces. These mishaps were easy to see. As one onlooker described, "along the line of roads leading to a large shipping point...the way was literally strewn with broken wagons, dead horses, oil barrels, filled and empty." Such a disabled horse or wagon was simply pushed to the side of the roadway to allow other teamsters to pass.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

A disabled wagon in the Oil Creek Valley south of Titusville.

As for the wagon roads leading out of the Oil Creek Valley, one eyewitness, in a crude poetic verse, described the Oil Regions' roadways as, "wholly unclassable, almost impassable, scarcely jackassable." Teamsters did their best to guide their jaded horses along the muddy wagon routes that at times were absolutely appalling to man and beast.

One local from the Oil Regions asserted that "Oil Creek [roadway] mud attained a fame in the earlier and subsequent years that will be fresh in the memory of those who saw and were compelled to wade through it. Teamsters and horsemen swore both loud and deep at it. Newspaper correspondents exhausted all their adjectives, epithets, and expletives in essaying to give a faint description of its demerits. Wary pedestrian pilgrims, like Bunyan's Christian, were inclined to part with their knapsacks after a brief experience; minister[s] of the Gospel and devoted laymen earnestly desired sustaining grace—while urging their weary beasts over and through it. Mud, deep, and indescribably disgusting, covered all the main and by-roads in wet weather, while the streets of the towns composing the chief shipping points had the appearance of liquid lakes or lands of mud." ^{xv}

Oil on the Pigtail



Courtesy of the Union City Historical Society Museum

Muddy Main Street of Union Mills. Teamsters and wagons had to negotiate such thoroughfares when hauling oil.

Mixed into the roadway's boggy sludge was oil from thousands of leaking oil barrels that dripped from the teamster's wagons onto the surface of the thoroughfares. The oil impregnated mud, kicked up by the innumerable hooves of horses and wagon wheels, would splatter onto the bodies of the dray animals up to the necks. Even during bouts of hot dry weather, the roadways remained slick with spilled oil. A teamster's horses, even if properly groomed, would during the course of hauling, be coated repeatedly with the oil-saturated grime.

Petroleum is toxic to horses and after such exposure the oil soon destroyed the animal's hair follicles and capillaries. Being constantly coated with the oil imbued mud and road grime, the hair

would soon fall away from the horse's neck on down. With the hair gone, the exposed hide of the horse would quickly become an inflamed mass of infected sores caused by chaffing harness, insect bites, and airborne pathogens—which soon caused the animal's death. The life expectancy of a horse transporting oil was set at three or four weeks with thousands of horses perishing during the first years of the oil boom. A bystander later commented, "the treatment of the patient creatures—thousands were literally murdered—was frightful and few survived...They were worked until they dropped dead." ^{xvi}

Barring accidents to the teamster, his horses, or his wagon, a successful week's delivery of barreled oil to a railroad shipping point earned the wagoner upwards of \$90 to \$180 for six days of work (approximately \$2,368 to \$4,736 in today's money). The teamsters would spend the money on all manner of goods and services from local businesses. Often teamsters would spend an entire week's wages on a single night's revelry. Town business owners profited greatly from the free spending teamsters who purchased copious amounts of tack and livery service, meals, groceries, lodging, sartorial goods, dry goods, spirituous libations, and entertainment that was legal, illegal, or immoral. Town and village businesses that were willing to put up with the occasional intoxicated shenanigans of the teamsters—thrived. ^{xvii}

The high wages paid to the teamsters seriously cut into the profits of the oil well owners. As the freewheeling teamsters made and spent their money, the oil producers actively sought other ways

to ship the oil from their wells. To rid themselves of teaming oil, the producers turned to the Oil Creek waterway.

In previous years, log rafts loaded with lumber had been floated down Oil Creek to the confluence of the Allegheny River by using manmade floods called freshets. The freshets were artificially created by the controlled letting of water from the many mill dams above Titusville. The resulting freshet-flood raised the level of Oil Creek some four feet to allow the passage of the lumber rafts. Once reaching the Allegheny River, the rafts were floated or towed by steamboats to Pittsburgh where the lumber (and raft) were sold.

Based on the successful rafting of lumber down Oil Creek in years' past, it was decided by oil well producers to float oil down the creek to the Allegheny River on shallow draft boats called skiffs. Each skiff would be operated and steered by a one, two, or three-man crew. During the freshet 100 to 200 various sized skiffs, each loaded with 25 to over 250 barrels of oil, would ride along the wild rushing floodwaters of the freshet to the creek's confluence at the Allegheny River.⁸ Arriving at the Allegheny, the barreled oil would be taken from the skiffs and put aboard barges and packet steamboats for transport to Pittsburgh.

⁸ Some sources have skiffs carrying up to 800 barrels of oil.



McLaurin, Sketches in Crude Oil

Skiffs and packet steamboats at the confluence of Oil Creek with the Allegheny River.

Such water transport was much cheaper than teaming, as low as two cents a barrel, but floating oil on a freshet was risky business. Oil producers came to realize that oil barrels on thin-hulled skiffs were much more fragile than a raft of lumber and logs. As one witness of the freshets remembered, “collisions and ‘jams’ were of common occurrence; a boat would by some mismanagement get aground, and thus swing round, by the force of the stream, when it filled with water and sunk. Against this obstacle the advancing boats dashed with great force, the weaker ones becoming splintered from the concussion, the stronger ones being wedged fast, in the order in which they came, and thus formed what is familiarly known on Oil Creek as a jam.” All told, on average, only three out of five skiffs arrived safely at the convergence of the Allegheny River and Oil Creek. ^{xviii}

Oil on the Pigtail

The staggering amount of petroleum being produced near Titusville simply overwhelmed both the teamsters and boatmen. A more reliable, cheaper, and efficient mode of oil transport was needed. The reliable and more efficient mode of transport would be built by a lawyer from Warren, Pennsylvania.

Chapter Four: A Straight-laced Teetotaler

Upon hearing of Drake's successful oil well in 1859, an enterprising attorney from Warren, Pennsylvania began to formulate a plan for a railroad spur from the *Philadelphia and Erie Railroad* to Titusville. A well-educated, dynamic speaking, "straight-laced teetotaler," Thomas Struthers was a successful lawyer, land speculator, railroad promoter, Pennsylvania State Legislator, railroad contractor, and railroad financier. Because of his vast experience in financing and building railroads, Struthers had a deep understanding of a railroad's capabilities.

Working quickly, Struthers formed a company on August 17, 1860, less than a year after the success of Drake's Well. The name of the newly formed company, *The Oil Creek Railroad*, succinctly described Struthers' intended business as he sought out financiers for his railroad.

However, to the dismay of Struthers, the main line railroad towns were disinclined to financially support a shortline railroad to Titusville. Town businessmen were quite satisfied catering to the needs (and taking the money) of the thousands of teamsters. To the people living in the railroad towns adjacent to the Oil Regions, common sense concluded that a railroad spur to Titusville would take oil barrels away from the teamsters' wagons. Instead of teamsters' money flowing into the towns' cash drawers, the oil-filled cars of a railroad leaving Titusville would steam past the village stations leaving only smoke and cinders instead of cash.

The businessmen of Union Mills had another reason not to finance a shortline railroad to Titusville. It was no secret that the main line *Atlantic and Great Western Railroad* would soon be extending its tracks from New York State across northwestern Pennsylvania through Union Mills. When completed, the *Atlantic and Great Western Railroad* would have direct through routes to refineries and markets in New York and Ohio, making Union Mills one of the premier destinations for teamsters and their barrels of oil.

Consequently, when the entrepreneur from Warren presented his railroad proposal to the monied-men of Union Mills, the proposal was flatly rejected. The leading businessmen of Union Mills responded to the railroad proposal by stating they, “preferred a good plank road...” as the best, cheapest, and most assured way to keep oil barrels (and teamsters’ money) flowing into the flourishing town.

Accordingly, a group of financiers from Union Mills, Titusville and the City of Erie formed the *Union and Titusville Plank or Timber Road Company* and received a Pennsylvania State Charter of Incorporation on March 27, 1862. The new company was authorized to build a plank road for horse-drawn wagons from Union Mills to Titusville. Circumstances would ensure the plank road would never be built (Fig. 4.1).

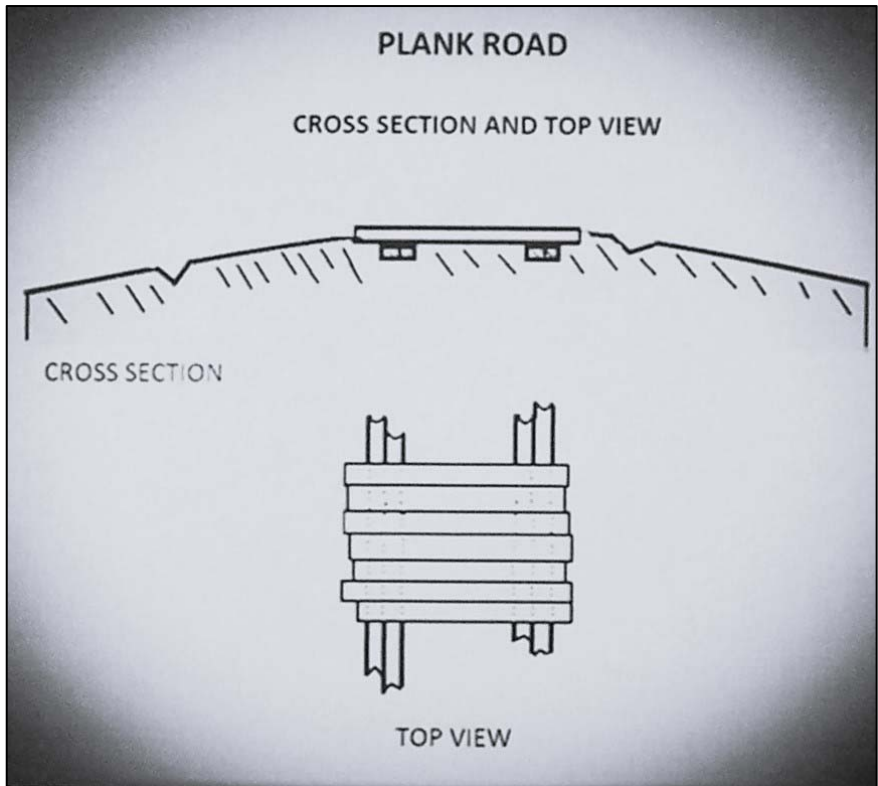
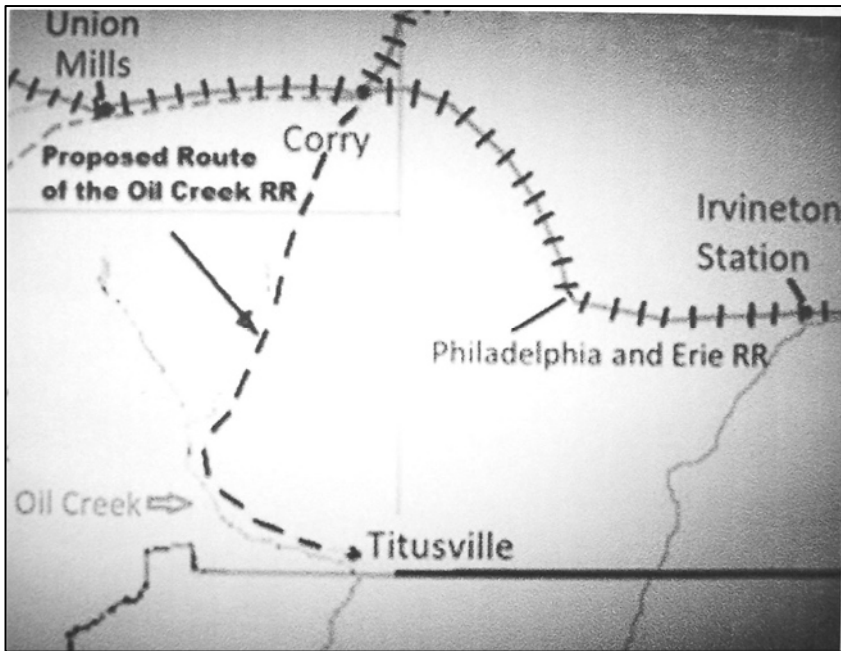


Illustration by author

(Fig. 4.1) A plank road was constructed by placing thick wooden planks longitudinally over stout wooden stringers to provide a solid mud-proof roadway for horses and wagons. A plank road was cheaper and quicker to build than a railroad.

Indifference and lack of interest from local towns and villages caused Struthers to select the route of his railroad from Titusville to the isolated and remote Corry Station (Map 4.1). The deciding factors in locating a terminal at the site of Corry was the cheapness of the land, the junction of two main line railroads located there, and an oil refinery being built near the junction. ^{xix}



Map by author

(Map 4.1) The proposed route of the *Oil Creek Railroad* from Corry to Titusville.

The Corry junction of the two main line railroads, namely the *Philadelphia and Erie* and the *Atlantic and Great Western*, was built on land purchased from Hiram Cory, a local farmer. Cory's farmland, by all accounts, was best described as "either hill or marsh" and mostly covered with an unbroken forest; basically a "low Hemlock bottom."

The two main line railroads shared a tiny station at Corry, not much more than a little huddle of shanties built near the railway junction. The remote station was given the name "Corry" by clerks of the *Atlantic and Great Western Railroad* who accidentally added another *r* to Hiram's last name when filing legal papers. Nevertheless, the mistake remained as it was easier than redoing the lengthy

paperwork. Corry would be the permanent name of the station and the city that would rapidly burst forth from the marshy bottomland.^{xx}

Thomas Struthers, after selecting Corry as a terminus, put his own money into the railroad project and began to entice other financial backers for his proposed road. After nearly two years of soliciting funds for his railroad, the persistent and articulate Struthers had persuaded a few Warren businessmen and a wealthy doctor from Cleveland, Ohio to invest in his new company.

With money in hand, Struthers started construction of his road. Immediately, problems arose with shortages of iron rails and workers. The ongoing American Civil War (1861 to 1865) had taken away iron used for military hardware and railroad workers who enlisted as soldiers.

Struthers solved the shortages of iron and workers by formulating a partnership with the *Atlantic and Great Western Railroad*. The partnership allowed for the *Atlantic and Great Western* to loan work crews, supply money, and provide iron rails to complete the *Oil Creek* road. The magnanimous generosity of the *Atlantic and Great Western* came with conditions. In return for the loans of men, money, and iron, the *Oil Creek Railroad* would be built to a six-foot gauge, the same gauge as the *Atlantic and Great Western* (Fig. 4.2). On an act of good faith, Struthers also had to hand over substantial amounts of his company's bonds and stock to the *Atlantic and Great Western Railroad Company*. More importantly, when the *Oil Creek Railroad* started bringing oil to the Corry junction, the barrels would be transferred to the *Atlantic and Great Western's* waiting freight cars. The arrangement would become a symbiotic money-making bonanza for both roads.



Photo by author

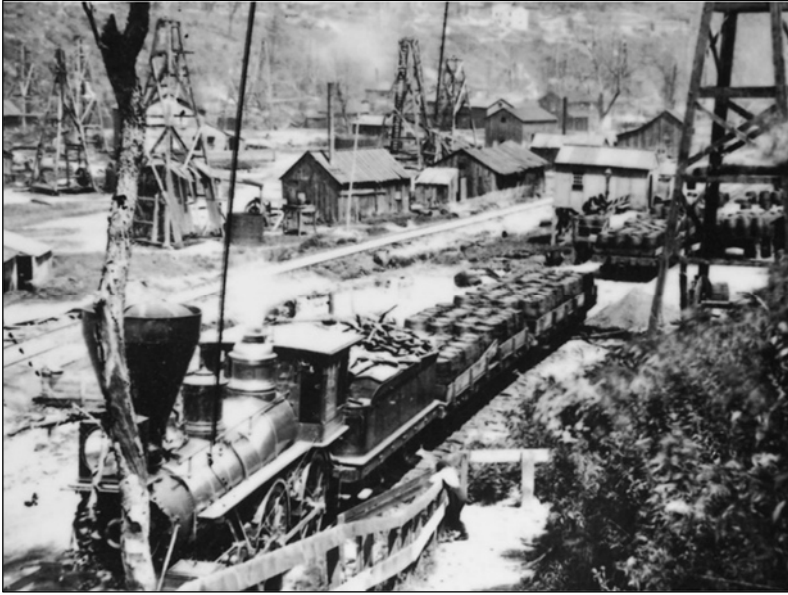
(Fig. 4.2) A rail gauge is the distance between the rails from the inner face of one rail to the inner face of the opposite rail (indicated by the white line). In the mid 1860's the United States had no mandated standard gauge with at least six different gauges being in use.

Struthers' company began construction of the railroad in May of 1862, and 120 working days later (no work was done on Sundays), the rail line had reached Titusville. The completion of the road gained national attention and was even noted in *The Times* newspaper of London, England. The British paper informed its English readers that the new *Oil Creek Railroad* was completed on September 1, 1862, with 27 miles of track between Corry and Titusville. The newspaper also gave the information that the *Oil Creek Railroad* connected with the *Philadelphia and Erie* and the *Atlantic and Great Western* main line roads at Corry, and that the connection with the main line roads allowed direct routes to the City of Erie and New York City.

The *Oil Creek Railroad* was built as quickly and cheaply as possible. A newspaper correspondent for the *New York Times* described his experience as a passenger on the *Oil Creek Railroad*: “...like everything in this curious part of the country...[railroad] excavations and heavy earthworks were things not to be thought of.” The reporter also noted that “with but trifling exceptions, the track is laid on the surface of the ground, and follows its inequalities.” If the road approached a ravine, the railbed was built around the depression if possible to avoid the delay of building a bridge, trestle or embankment. If a large stump defied being grubbed out of the ground, the stump, “...was suffered to stand still in its sulkiness, and the track was laid around it.” The result, according to the correspondent, was an uphill, downhill, twisting and turning road to, “...have rarely been seen in railroad engineering.” However, the *Oil Creek Railroad*, as acknowledged by the reporter, was a “paying” road and that was all that mattered. ^{xxi}

Shoddy construction aside, the *Oil Creek Railroad* was an astounding financial success. From September 1862 to December 1863 the rail line had hauled freights of 23,883 tons of merchandise, 397,093 barrels of petroleum, 459,424 empty barrels, and 47,061 passengers; generating a revenue of \$337,453.06. After paying interest on bonds, wages to workers, bills for construction of depots, road repair, road maintenance, and a host of other sundry expenses, a surplus of \$104,690.34 (nearly \$2,203,500 in today’s money) was realized. *Oil Creek Railroad* stockholders received a first annual dividend of 25 percent that rose to 53 percent the following year. Significantly, the entire cost of constructing the *Oil Creek Railroad* was paid off in the first six months of the road’s operation. ^{xxii}

Oil on the Pigtail



Courtesy of The Drake Well Museum, PHMC

As a boy looks on, an *Oil Creek Railroad* train collects a shipment of barreled oil.

Struthers' railroad quickly transformed the tiny rail station of Corry. Within a few months after the completion of the *Oil Creek Railroad*, hundreds of people had moved to Hiram Cory's former farmstead to work in the oil refinery, to work on the three railroads that intersected there, or to work in a host of ancillary occupations. In just two years, the former swampy hemlock bottomland had grown from a few shanties near the railroad station to become a Borough. Three years later, Corry attained city status with a population topping 6,000, with no less than 14 hotels in the city accommodating visitors. The chance meeting of the three railroads made the former farm of Hiram Cory the most important petroleum transportation center in the Oil Regions. As an editor of a contemporary gazetteer succinctly

put it, “No sane man would have selected the site on which Corry stands, as a fit place to found a city.”^{xxiii}

The frenzied building spree at Corry from 1862 to 1866 resulted in two nicknames for the community. Surveyors laying out the various building and railroad parcels at Corry used strings to mark plots giving rise to the unusual nickname of Corry as the “City of Strings.” The rapid clear-cutting of the thick hemlock forest to make way for the refinery, homes, hotels, stores, and warehouses left innumerable stumps. The stumps that could not be grubbed out of the yards and roadways caused a less appealing moniker of Corry as the “City of Stumps” (Fig. 4.3). For many years, huge tree stumps remained firmly ensconced in city streets and yards as wooden monuments to the miraculous growth of the City of Corry.^{xxiv}

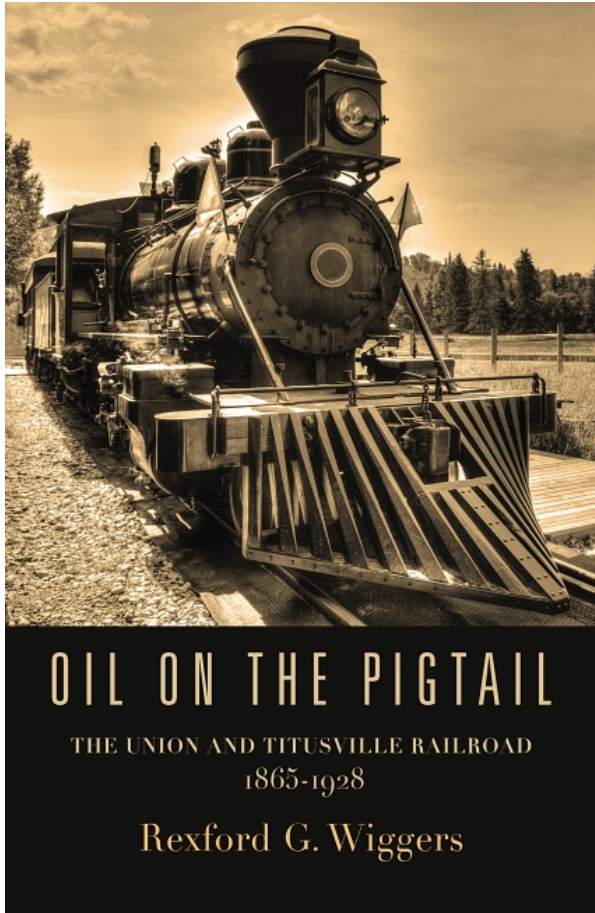


Courtesy of the Corry Area Historical Society

(Fig. 4.3) The rapid building of the City of Corry is evident in this image (circa 1862). The hemlock forest that had recently covered the homesites is seen in the background.

Oil on the Pigtail

The residents of Union Mills found it hard to ignore what was happening 12 miles eastward at Hiram Cory's farm. It was painfully obvious to the citizens of Union Mills that the town of Cory's amazing growth and prosperity was brought about by the *Oil Creek Railroad*.



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