



THE PRETTY RIVER VALLEY OIL SCAM

By H. David Vuckson

The definitive eye witness account of this story by Ruth Carmichael Bryan (1923-1975) was published by the Enterprise-Bulletin in 1967 in a collection called "Tales of Collingwood" under the title "Bonanza".

The time was the spring of 1941. After ten years of the Great Depression, prosperity had returned to Collingwood due, in large part, to the activities of one A. Hitler. Two major industries in town were going flat out for the war effort: the Collingwood Shipyard was building Corvettes as fast as it could (six were launched that year) and the Clyde Aircraft Manufacturing Company Ltd., on the site of what later became Kaufman Furniture, were making parts for warplanes as well as other wartime materiel.

My mother, Catharine Hewson, between the time of her graduation from a Commercial course at C.C.I. and her marriage to my father in December 1941, worked for ten years as a legal secretary in a couple of law offices in town [the Depression notwithstanding, she managed to save the grand sum of \$100.00 from ten years of employment!]. At this time, she was employed in the law office of Malcolm ("Mac") McLean in the Temple Building on Hurontario Street. The expression "There's a

sucker born every minute”, widely attributed to showman P. T. Barnum, but more likely uttered by his rival David Hannum in 1869, certainly applied in this story. My mother’s boss fell for a scam that cost him thousands of dollars.

One day a slick stranger rolled into Collingwood in a Cadillac limousine which attracted a lot of attention as it stopped in front of the Arlington Hotel. The stranger himself attracted even more attention upon exiting the car—about six and a half feet tall (devilishly handsome, my mother told me), a big cigar in his mouth, and with an aura of mystique about him that had everyone for a distance of half a block in each direction staring at him. The intrigue increased as he purposefully left some papers in full view on the back seat before he entered the Arlington to check in. It was all carefully staged for the locals. The bell boy saw the papers when retrieving the man’s bag and despite the lack of cell phones, Twitter and the like, within minutes the talk was spreading like wildfire on Hurontario St.

The stranger’s name was Purdue and he was involved with oil and was asking where to find the Pretty River Valley. With this hot tip, Malcolm McLean telephoned a cousin in the Nottawa area and, of course, everyone else on that country party line listened in and learned that something big was in the works. Meanwhile, further gossip in town had revealed that Purdue was supposedly connected with the American university of the same name and that he had participated in finding oil wells in the United States and in South America. Purdue met with my mother’s boss to talk about options on land in the Pretty River Valley and was talking money in six figures, and all the while nearly bending over backwards to promote his honesty.

Eighteen year-old Ruth Carmichael, a young reporter for the *Toronto Telegram*, interviewed Purdue who told her that he had been doing “secret” work for the Ontario government for the last year, and that he expected the Pretty River Valley to have oil reserves comparable to those in Alberta [!]. When it became known that the Chief of Police had written down the licence plate number of the Cadillac, Purdue had to act fast to pull off his trickery. Ruth was awakened by the telephone at 5:00 a.m. the next morning. On the line was a very excited Mac McLean who told her to go to the studio of local photographer D. O. Deacon and that he and Purdue would pick up her and Deacon at 6:00 a.m. to head out to the oil fields of Nottawa to record history in the making. Ruth found Deacon “indisposed” due to a certain liquid that is made from fermented grain mash, so, at his invitation, she borrowed his camera, leaving him behind.

At the Nottawa Sideroad, under cover of darkness while the locals slept, Purdue’s co-conspirators had set up some makeshift wooden tripods along with a pump and a couple of barrels. Black oil was coming out of the pump and this was to be Lawyer McLean’s personal oil well. There was general rejoicing and Ruth took a photo to record the historic event. On returning the camera to Deacon with a written request to have a print ready the same day, she decided to buy a camera of her own just in case Deacon didn’t come through. In the mid-afternoon Ruth summoned Dan Brown to take her out to Nottawa in his taxi. When they got there, nothing remained of all the equipment she had seen at 6:30 that morning except for some oil on the grass. Dan Brown determined that it was refined oil. The crooks had simply been pumping oil out of one barrel and into another through a hose hidden under the sod and, as it was later learned from someone who

lived nearby they packed up and left right after the early morning demonstration.

Because the Chief of Police had been suspicious of Purdue from the start, he passed on the licence plate number of the Cadillac to the Ontario Provincial Police who apprehended Purdue in Windsor shortly before he crossed the border on his way to Detroit. It turned out that he had a long list of fraud charges against him. There was a happy ending to this elaborate scheme, lawyer McLean's embarrassment notwithstanding. Purdue confessed he had McLean's \$6000.00 on him *in cash* so at least the money could be returned.

Had there actually been oil in the ground, the Pretty River Valley would not have been pretty for very long. Instead of the many orchards and Arden Redpath's apple stand that we have been so accustomed to, there would have been pipelines, tanks, and all the rest of the infrastructure connected with oil wells, as well as tanker trucks and possibly even long lines of oil tanker cars being hauled up and down the nearby Hamilton & Northwestern Railway line between Collingwood and Hamilton via Beeton. But it was not to be.

In the words of an old pun: *"Oil's well that ends well."*

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