

Prosperity float on sea of oil

when President William Taft freed up much of the oil drilling in 1912, the grateful workers found a handy alternative.

From the start, Taft was a proponent.

Original Indian inhabitants were oozing seeps to water their boats and baskets.

"It's an oily area," says Larry Meriage, vice president of public affairs for Occidental. "But Elk is an anomaly, because it is the light crude, while all the other is the (less desirable) heavy crude that is just like tar."

In the early days of frenzied drilling, before any environmental regulations were in place, freespills fouled the low-lying pools.

Standard of living

Mr. Taft, who grew up in Taft and attended Taft College, says during his boyhood the town was a boom town, with plenty of work and a high standard of living.

During the boom times — in the 1920s, World War II, the late 1940s and the boomlet brought on by the oil embargo in 1976 — oil workers underwrote some of the economic problems in the state. Even during the Great Depression, Taft was so good one-third of the graduates went on to college, and with 10 percent of graduation nationwide.

Oil derricks were our jungles, our playground," says Larry Meriage, a Bakersfield certified accountant who grew up in Taft.

Youngsters a respite from the relentless heat of summer. Oil workers built Camp Taft on 200 acres on nearby Indian land. It was open to all, regardless of means. The camp was almost wrest-

Perished

As at the Smithsonian, estimates that the total cost, including an endowment, future mending and education programs, will cost \$18.2 million. Officials plan to raise the money from foundation, corporate, and public-sector

ed from the town when the county threatened to sell the land to the McDonald's Corp.

Knost says incensed townspeople, many lifelong residents, held bake sales to hire a top lawyer to thwart the plan, and Camp Concord is still a refuge for Taft kids.

What remains unclear, however, is just how many new jobs the oil boom will bring to Taft, since

it's likely that some Occidental employees from other states will be moving to Elk Hills.

"We are very interested in forming alliances with local contractors," Meriage, Occidental vice president of public affairs says.

But as for specifics?

"We'll just have to let the dust settle," Meriage says.

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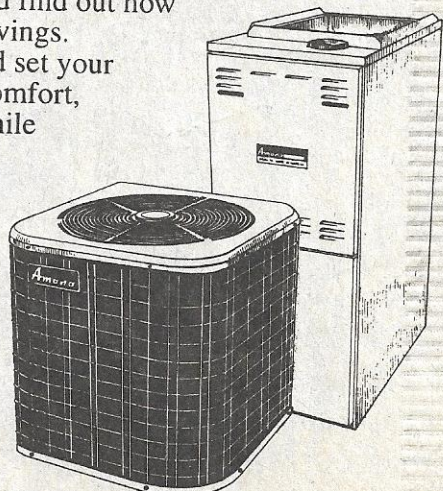
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