

“Cat Creek Oil Discovery,” by Curley Meek

We came into Winnett in October [1919]. . . . Because of a threatened coal strike we were held there . . . seven weeks before we could get out to the well. . . . The coal strike hit the first part of November, by the 8th the trains had been curtailed. Where there had been one train every day before to Winnett, there were now only two a week. In those days the railroad was the only transportation except wagons and horses. There were a few cars, but there were no reliable roads.

Before we got this rig out we had to change over from coal to wood. . . . To pump the water we lay pipeline on top of the ground and built fires all along the pipeline. That way we could pump water even when it was 40° below, and 1919 was one of the longest and hardest winters that we ever had in Montana. . . .

This well was started in December. It came in February, 1920. We got a little oil. Then the excitement started. They tried to keep it a little quiet because it was all government land then. . . . There was no such thing as a lease law until they passed it on February 26. That is why they wanted to keep it a little quiet, but it was kind of hard. When I sent a wire to Frank Franz,

the president of the company in Denver, I sent it to him in a code. . . . The wire read, “Pine trees grow tall here, come ye men of war.” They had it fixed up that way. “Trees grow tall” meant a big well, “small” meant a small well. If it didn’t grow, there was no well at all, and “come ye men of war,” meant to bring a number of men.

There was a lot of excitement around Winnett. Everybody tried to get me drunk and everything else to try to find out if they got a well. In the meantime the well had filled up and run over. . . . It would have looked much better if they had let it flow because it wasn’t pure oil. There was quite a little water with the well. But when they came up they saw there was water with it but they backed away and went to get the mining claims in good standing. They didn’t drill the well until April 4th. It came in with about 50 barrels. . . .

Source: *Curley Meek Narrative, [19—]. Oral History 182.* Montana Historical Society Research Center. Archives. Excerpted in *Not In Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena, 1976): 255.