Oil and Ventura

Oil and gas extraction and production are a vital part of the history and economy of Ventura County representing by 2011 two out of the top ten property taxpayers with $333 million in payments and supporting over 7,300 jobs. Oil exploration in Ventura County began in the 1860s with oil pioneer George Shoobridge Gilbert extracting asphaltum, a crude unrefined sealant for roads and houses, and refining oil by using stills at Sulphur Mountain. By 1865 Thomas Bard operated the first commercially viable well above Santa Paula where a boom began in 1916 with the discovery of the South Mountain Oil Field. The oil scene on the bronze front door of the Courthouse Annex built in the 1930s reinforces petroleum's economic importance to our county.

Oil scene from City Hall West (Courthouse Annex) Bronze Entry
Photo by Cynthia Thompson

Chumash Tar

Ventura's natural tar seeps – places where for millennia oil has reached the surface on its own – provided native Chumash a sealant for their tomol watercraft. Even today hikers and drivers along Highway 150 between Santa Paula and the Upper Ojai can encounter crude oil bubbling up in valleys or flowing down hillsides.

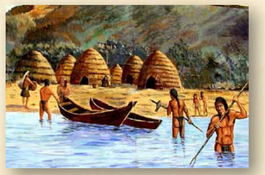


Photo of 1992 Lompoc mural by Robert Thomas.

From Bean to Oilfields

Ventura Avenue's orchards and bean fields above Stanley Avenue and Cañada Larga Road soon gave way to oilfields of wells, derricks and pumpjacks with the 1919 commercial oil discoveries within its rugged petroleum-rich terrain that folds like an accordion towards Ojai.

Oilfield, Ventura
Photo courtesy of Glenda Jackson.

A pumpjack, thirsty bird or nodding donkey is the over-ground drive for a reciprocating piston pump to lift oil from the well.

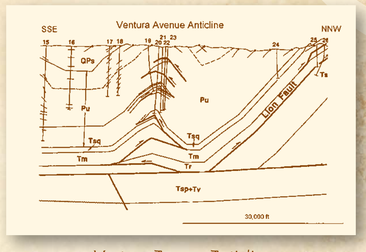
The Ventura Oil Field

By 1926 the Ventura Oil Field, discovered in 1919, produced over 20,000 barrels per day drawing workers and their families to spike the young county's population. While its activity peaked in the 1950s, the field is still active with 423 wells – the seventh largest in California with a cumulative production of a billion barrels of oil.

Remains of this former oil storage and processing facility along Route 33 still stand today.

Ventura Anticline

A geologic structure called the Ventura Anticline runs east to west for 16 miles, dipping steeply 30-60 degrees at both ends so that its series of sedimentary sand beds resemble a longhouse with gabled roof – an impermeable rock cap under which vast reserves of oil and gas collect. The pools of its eight different oil bearing zones vary greatly from 3,500 to 12,000 feet, formed as they migrated upward during the Pliocene Era into the traps and folds of surface rock.



Ventura Avenue Anticline
Image source: AAPG Bulletin of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists.

Exploration Moves Offshore

Oil exploration halted during the Depression but surged after World War II with two large oilfields discovered in the 1960s off the coast of Carpinteria and Santa Barbara, where the region's oil production operations are concentrated today.

Abe & Will Hobson began some of the first oil exploration up coast in the Rincon circa 1895 – these fields north of Ventura became very productive in the 1920s.

City Hall Through the Years
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