Henry Rouse and Other Chautauquans at the Great Exploding Oil Well April 17, 1861
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Many of you may remember Thornton Wilder's 1927 novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* that is still read and discussed as a literary classic. It is the story of five persons who die when a footbridge in Peru collapses. With precise and skillful prose Wilder describes how the lives of these persons led them to the bridge.

In the hands of a skilled writer, the story we tell today could be just such a classic. Our story centers about the great oil well explosion on 17th of April 1861 and the Chautauqua County residents who lost their lives that night, were seriously injured, or were on the scene and provided eye-witness accounts.

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The central character of our story is Henry Rouse of Westfield–the ideal hero. He started out in life very poor and through his own energetic efforts became outrageously rich and successful. Along the way he is described as kind and fair in all his dealings, generous to, and highly regarded by all who knew him. His place in the history of oil is minor only because his time as an oil man was cut short by his tragic death, but true to his heroism, in the end his fortune was dispersed for the benefit of the general public. So, who was Henry Rouse?

Glimpses at his early life are brief but we know that he was born August 24th 1824 to Samuel D and Sarah Rouse and spent most of his first sixteen years in Westfield. When he left home to take up business in Pennsylvania, he continued to call Westfield, where his mother remained, home. Westfield reciprocated this closeness and its local newspaper, the *Westfield Republican* regularly printed communications attributed to the Honorable H R Rouse while represented a large portion of Warren & Crawford Counties in the Pennsylvania State Legislature, and in the end, at his request, he was buried beside his mother in the Westfield Cemetery.

The childhood poverty described in all biographical records seemed due to the lack of the father's presence in the home. Sarah Rouse is listed as head of household in the 1840 census and at her death in August 1850, the only newspaper reference calls her "the widow Rouse", although Samuel was still alive. We found one other newspaper mention in the 1840's. The teacher at the Rogersville school was "the widow Rouse." We found no proof that the schoolmarm widow was indeed our hero's mother, Sarah. If we were writing that novel, we could make a wonderful story of these family dynamics, but being historians, we will stick to the truth–or to what is promoted to be the truth.

Henry was educated in Westfield to the age of 12, then went to Jamestown and attended the Academy there for about two years. Reportedly, his intellect was so highly regarded that his Westfield teachers paid the tuition that

he could not afford. Also reported, when he became wealthy he repaid all those old tuition bills with interest. We read that Henry "excelled in spirited orations" and this caught the attention of the father of Governor Seward who saw that Henry was placed in the office of lawyer Abram Dixon of Westfield to study law.

Now we run into problems with conflicting truths. From contemporary sources there are two versions of the reasons Henry abandoned the legal profession–one, because a slight speech impediment led him to feel disqualified, and the other, that "rejected by his love, he left the law and Westfield." Forget the fact that I always prefer the romantic version, how can I believe on one hand that Henry "excelled in spirited orations" and in the next, had a "speech impediment" that would disqualify him as a lawyer? So I assign more credence to the romantic version and believe that his acquaintance with Governor Seward and his close friendship with Robert Brigham suggest that this romantic interest may have been within that upper crust Seward/Risley/Brigham family connection. In the novel, our author could really milk this "romance" angle.

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We also encounter two versions of his entry into the mercantile business in Warren County Pennsylvania. Both include his service as a schoolteacher. J T Henry in his 1873 *Early and Later History of Petroleum* writes that Henry, laying law aside temporarily, engaged in teaching a district school in the town of Ripley for one winter. At the close of the school he received $100, and in company of a friend named Brigham, went into mercantile and lumber pursuits in the wilds of western Pennsylvania....A few months later, we find him located at Enterprise, Warren County, just five miles from Titusville.

But Mr Rouse's obituary in the *Jamestown Journal* states: ....After two years he relinquished the study of law and went to Warren in the fall of 1840, reaching the village of Warren with only a five-franc piece in his pocket...He taught that first winter in the village of Tidioute, being obliged to collect his own school tax....The times being hard, took his pay partly in shingles. In the spring he put the rest of his money in shingles, put the whole on a raft and sent them to Pittsburgh. The next spring he bought more shingles, shipped them to the same market and became in a year or two able to run a raft of his own and this laid the foundation of a fortune in lumbering and he was soon able to buy an interest in a mill and produce his own lumber and run his own fleet of rafts. A similar version was told by George W Brown in his book *Old Times In Oildom*, but in Brown's version the school where Mr Rouse was paid in shingles was located near Youngsville in Warren County.

There is no doubt that Henry Rouse and his boyhood friend, Robert Brigham, were in the mercantile business in Enterprise before 1845. Deeds in two county court houses show that they made purchases of several stands of timber in the southwest corner of Warren County and in April of 1845 bought 175 acres in Oil Creek Township,

Crawford County. It seems probable that when Henry left Westfield for Warren County it was because his friend was already located there. The *Fredonia Censor* had obituaries of members of the Brigham family near Youngsville as early as 1839. In June of 1850 the *Censor* reported the marriage of Henry's partner, Robert Brigham, of Enterprise PA, to Mary Ann Kenyon of Barcelona. In the 1850 census Henry is living in a hotel, lists his occupation as lumberman, and claims personal property valued at $500. His friend Robert Brigham, also a lumberman, lives nearby with his wife and claims property of $8000. We know this partnership dissolved before the discovery of oil, because at the death of Brigham's mother in 1857, her surviving son Robert resided at Amboy, Lee County, Illinois.

Biographers agree that at Enterprise Henry Rouse resided with the Thomas Morian family. Both Morian and his wife were born right here in the town of Pomfret and in that 1850 census were enumerated in Warren County between Rouse's residence at the Spencer hotel and the home of Robert Brigham. Rouse's close ties with the Morian family are verified by mention several times in his famous will. By 1857 when Rouse was elected to the Pennsylvania State Legislature he owned one of the largest sawmills in the area. A reporter from the *Warren Mail* visited the mill at the time Rouse was running for re-election in August of 1859. His long and flowery newspaper article described the mill as "the last word in perfection in all its arrangements" and restated the legend of its owner who "fifteen years ago pitched into this wild country among the bears and catamounts, a penniless adventurer"....etc, etc, etc...

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About the same time this pitch for re-election was published, Colonel Edwin L Drake drew up oil from that great and historic first well. The second well drilled was the Barnsdale well. Now, Barnsdale was a shoemaker who lived just outside Titusville on the road to Enterprise. His his brother-in-law owned a farm very near the Drake well. Barnsdale realized the potential for extracting great wealth from the earth but could not afford the tools to drill a well. So, enter Henry Rouse who put up the cash. Tools were fashioned by a Titusville blacksmith and soon Rouse was earning a rich reward from the second Pennsylvania oil well. In September of 1859, before the outside world heard any news of the discovery of oil, Rouse and his partners leased the two Buchanan farms below Titusville on Oil Creek. The success of the Barnsdale well was soon followed by several producing wells on Buchanan Flats and Rouse began a general investment in oil lands. Wealth poured upon him in fabulous volume.

For eighteen months, Henry R Rouse was at the top in every aspect of his business life. He took an active interest in the oil operation and was on the scene at Buchanan Flats on April 17, 1861. He and several others sat in the lobby of the Anthony Hotel discussing the important news of the outside world–news that had taken three

days to reach this area--the fall of Fort Sumter. Suddenly, a laborer on a new well burst into the room to report that a "monstrous vein of oil had been struck and more barrels were needed to collect it." George H Dimick, also from Westfield, described as Henry Rouse's confidential clerk and a relative of the family, went immediately to locate barrels, and in doing so saved his own life, as the others rushed to the scene of the newly flowing well. Of the group sitting discussing the war news that evening in the Anthony Hotel, Dimick was the only one unscathed; all the others perished or were scarred for life in the minutes that followed.

Stephen Palmer of Fredonia, who owned an interest in the new well, was at the scene but was at another hotel owned by fellow Fredonian, Horace Fox. Five days later, on April 22 Palmer's eye-witness account was published in the *Fredonia Censor*: "A tremendous explosion occurred at the Sherman Well on the other side of the stream about half a mile from the hotel...A cry of fire at the same instant created a grand rush and in minutes five hundred people were at the bank of the creek making all kinds of effort to get across to safety....The immense volume of gas issuing from the well ignited by some means and produced an explosion, awful and terrific, carrying death and destruction in its way....Instantaneously a column of flame shot heavenward two hundred feet with a noise that nothing I ever heard, even the rushing Niagara, could equal....One compact column of fire, 50 to 75 feet high, scattering and falling to earth in a spray of live brilliant fire...Vivid flashes went up 200-300 feet....the country for three miles easterly is sprinkled with oil. It continued to burn with unabated fury though the night and until Thursday night and continued less and less until Saturday night about 7 o'clock when by Herculean efforts of forty men with shovels, it was finally extinguished." Mr Palmer went on for several more paragraphs to describe the scene, the amount of lost oil and the horrible loss of life. Palmer and his associates suffered financially from the disaster as the oil recovered in the few days following the fire was all that was ever gained from the investment. The well and all its machinery were lost. Many nearby wells were put out of service as the fire consumed derricks and machinery as well as oil. Among the derricks were dozens, maybe hundreds, of shanties put up to house the workers and their families. Manyof these were lost.

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Henry Rouse was carried to one such shanty following the blast. A Jamestown resident at the scene, identified only as "F" writes in the *Jamestown Journal*, Mr H R Rouse of the village of Enterprise, a gentleman largely interested in wells in the locality, was standing near the pit and was blown twenty feet by the explosion. He got up and ran ten to fifteen feet further and was dragged out by two men and conveyed to a shanty some distance from the well. When he arrived, not a vestige of clothing was left on him save his stockings and boots. His hair was burned off as well as his fingernails, his eyes and his eyelids, while the balls of his eyes were crisped up to nothingness.

Those surviving boots, a portrait of Henry Rouse, and his will, an amazing document composed during the few hours he survived following the explosion, can be seen at the Warren County Historical Museum. Warren County, Pennsylvania, has good reason to honor the memory of Henry Rouse as suffering though he was, he dictated a will "in concise terms and correct in language...being obliged to have water given him with a spoon not only at the end, but in the middle of every sentence." The bulk of his estate was bequeathed in trust to the Commissioners of Warren County for the improvement of roads and the benefit of the poor. He requested amounts of cash be given the men who carried him away from the fire. Several items and cash were to go to the children of the Thomas Morian family mentioned earlier, and to others who had befriended him along his way. His library was left to his father and, realizing the end was near, it was here he requested burial beside his mother in Westfield.

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We know from the will that Zeb Martin of Jamestown and Allen Wright of Westfield were among those present in the shanty. Their signatures appear as witnesses. Allen Wright, well-known in Westfield for many other pursuits, was the one who pushed for naming that shanty village on Cherry Run "Rouseville." This became a thriving community and its name that still appears on every roadmap of Pennsylvania. Zeb Martin, a native of the town of Portland, and owner of the Brunswick Hotel in Titusville, has another interesting connection to early oil. He claimed later in life that on a business trip to New York he recognized Col Drake, the discoverer of oil, on a street corner in an impoverished condition. He took Drake to dinner and handed him twenty dollars. Upon his return to Titusville, Martin raised money for the relief of Drake and his family. Martin also inspired the magnificent memorial to Col Drake in the Titusville Cemetery near the site of the first well.

It is interesting that in Stephen Palmer's letter to the *Censor*, he called the exploding well The Sherman Well–a name given the next year to another well that was very successful. The Merrick & Hawley company of Sherman, Chautauqua County NY, furnished the engines and drilling tools used for that ill-fated well. Among those killed were four residents of Sherman–George Hayes, Smith Cushing, John Reisling and Philander Stevens. The newspapers of the day relished the information that George Hayes was a bridegroom of less than a year and that his body was so completely consumed in the fire that there was not an ash left for the griefstricken young widow to bury. We know from records in the Town Clerk's office that the body of Smith Cushing was buried in Sherman Cemetery on May 19th 1861, thirty-two days after the explosion. I could learn nothing of the other two, but probably all were employees of Merrick and Hawley. Isaac Hawley was an established merchant in Sherman whose daughter married Sylvenus H Merrick, manufacturer of those all-important steam engines. We found an action brought in Chautauqua County Court that spring by Isaac Hawley seeking compensation for the

equipment destroyed in the fire. The result was a judgement of $300 from three Fredonia owners of the exploding well, including our Stephen Palmer. There was no indication that the judgement was ever paid.

Young Judd Mason of Ripley, Chautauqua County, was another one of the nineteen who died. In the 1855 census he was 16 years old and living in Ripley with the family of his brother, Addison. A tombstone in Quincy Rural Cemetery in Ripley revealed that Judson Mason lived from 1839 to 1861. He was buried with Hezekiah and Rosanna R Mason, presumably his parents. Though the Mason family was well-known in Ripley and Westfield, I was unable to learn more about Judd. But we can make up some good stuff for our novel.

Henry R Case of French Creek was severely injured by the well explosion. Quoting from his biography, "... In 1861 he was attracted to the oil fields of Venango Co PA, which offered superior advantages to investors as being far more profitable than investments in farming at that time. During the early part of his time in Pennsylvania, he was seriously burned and lost the sight of one of his eyes at a flowing well that caught fire and burned nineteen others to death. The injuries which he received prevented his entering the late war and when he quit operating in oil in 1865 he became a member of the firm of Cross and Case at Corry PA which lasted eight years." In November 1888, Henry Case was elected sheriff of Chautauqua County.

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The last known Chautauquan on the published list of those seriously injured in the explosion and fire was George Kent of Cherry Creek. Kent was one of the large number of people related to the Morian clan of Chautauqua County present in that center of activity in early oildom. The patriarch, Jacob Morian of Pomfret owned a barn on the Buchanan farm in which vats of oil were stored, presumable from a well of which he was part owner. This barn and the oil stored within were lost in the fire. Jacob Morian was seventy-nine years old in 1861 and probably was at his home known as Morian Station near present-day Van Buren. Son Thomas & family (you remember) were at Enterprise, just down the road from the disaster scene. Thomas's son Carlos, age 17, had been sent to Fredonia Academy for the Spring semester and thus escaped being among the young oil workers at the scene.

Another of Jacob Morian's sons, Anthony, settled with his family in Cherry Creek, Chautauqua County. Anthony's daughter, Martha, was married to George Kent, member of a prominent Cherry Creek family and a skilled blacksmith. Blacksmiths was essential to the oil industry– to build and maintain the tools used in drilling. This skill, plus his connection to the Morian family, probably led George Kent to the scene that that fateful night. Kent, though seriously injured, recovered and returned to Cherry Creek and raised a large family. Some really good twists to our plot can be played out with this clan.

We must introduce one more family to our cast of characters. At the scene in one of these newly-created occupations of the industry was Franklin Sumter Tarbell. Circumstances led him to become proprietor of the shop at Buchanan Farms that built the tanks to contain the oil coming in ever-increasing volume. Frank Tarbell was probably the man sought out by Rouse's agent, Dimick, when he heard the news of the oil strike that evening.

Tarbell graduated from Jamestown Academy, having earned tuition by running flatboats down the Allegheny and Ohio Rivers, trading merchandise along the way, maybe even as an agent for Henry Rouse. He considered teaching to be his profession, but also learned the trade of carpenter and joiner. Tarbell went west in 1859 to take up a claim in Iowa, returning for his young wife and family who were living temporarily with her parents in Erie County PA. His return coincided with the excitement of the first oil wells and the desperate need of skilled workers to build the barrels to contain the oil. The confident Tarbell told the owner of a well (very likely Henry Rouse) that he could build a tank that would hold five hundred barrels of oil. That owner replied, "Show me a model that won't leak and I'll give you an order." He built the tank, it did not leak, so Frank Tarbell set up his shop at the mouth of Cherry Run on the Buchanan Farm.

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We are privileged to know much about Frank Tarbell because he had a daughter named Ida who grew up to be a first class writer. Her first professional writing experience was as founder and editor of the *Chautauquan*, the newspaper of Chautauqua Institution, still in existence. If Alfreda Irwin were in her usual place at our luncheon, she would be nodding in agreement because she would know Ida Tarbell's work, having followed in her footsteps at Chautuaqua. Ida is best known for her book *History of The Standard Oil Company* which was also an expose of the way John D Rockefeller rode roughshod over the little guys of early oil–but that's a story for another time. Ida told us the stuff of interest today in her autobiography, *All in the Day's Work.*

The Tarbell family lived in that village soon to be named Rouseville. Ida described their home: "Close beside his shop father built a shanty. It had a living room with an alcove, a family bedroom with trundle beds for us children, and a kitchen. A covered passage led to the shop." She continued,.... "Up and down Oil Creek a succession of flowing wells came in...deadly dangerous too, as the Oil Region learned to its sorrow by a disaster almost at the doorstep of our Cherry Run home. It was the evening of April 17, 1861." She goes on to describe the gushing well and what good news it was for her father's business, then describes the explosion and recounted the heroic story of Rouse's death. Then, in Ida's words

"Late that night as my father and mother grieved they heard outside their door a stumbling something. Looking out, they saw before them a terrible sight, a man burned and swollen beyond recognition and yet alive enough to

give his name–one of their friends. My mother took him in–the alcove became a hospital. For weeks she nursed him–the task of the woman in a pioneer community, a task which she accepted as her part. Thanks to her care, the man lived." Ida Tarbell never gives the name of that man--he may have Henry Case or George Kent.

Yes, indeed someone should write that novel. It could psychoanalyze these characters and examine the intertwined lives of the Chautauquans who came together by fate or by chance on that awful April night almost a century and a half ago.

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