

Save Our Century: It's Your Story

The Words column in the April/May 1995 *PESA NEWS* was about my concerns that much of the history of our industry was in danger of being lost. I was thinking particularly about the photographic material in company and private collections, and I offered to establish an archive for this.

My fascination with the history of petroleum exploration began when I joined WAPET in 1967 and discovered all the old reports in the library. I'd collected a lot of old photos and reports over subsequent years, especially while working on the PESA WA symposia, and I came to see the need for a concerted effort to systematically collect all this material. I thought I could get the collection started, with the long-term plan being to pass the material over to Battye Library, the archives in the WA State Library.

For various reasons, not least the need to earn a living, I had made less progress than I had intended, and WABS 2 last year reminded me that a renewed effort was needed.

I was delighted to hear, therefore, of the Save Our Century (SOC) initiative by the WA State Library. This project is dedicated to collecting and preserving the history of Western Australia through the 20th Century.

The collection will be given direction and form by a focus on a number of themes or 'stories', as they are being called: Arts, Banking, Finance and Law, Business, the Land, Mining and Resource Development, Oil and Gas, Science and Technology, the Sea, and Sport.

To help direct the project and raise the funding it will need, the WA State Library has appointed a group of Custodians, each having specific responsibility for one of the themes. I was delighted to be asked to serve as the Custodian for the Oil and Gas section of the project.

Most of the SOC project obviously has a Western Australian focus, but the oil and gas collection is not limited in that regard. The APPEA Community Relations Committee has suggested that the collection might best serve the industry by taking in material nationwide, and establishing an archive for all oil and gas exploration in Australia. That is the current plan.

Dr Lynn Allen, the State Librarian of Western Australia, said recently that "the history written in the future will only be as accurate

as the documents and supporting materials that have been deposited in the archives".

"The archives should be all encompassing, if history is to be accurate - and interesting. We need the personal face as well as the industry profile".

"We need to collect a wide variety of materials including films, photographs, personal diaries, research notes, academic papers, oral histories, official publications, government records and, of course, business records".

My concern, when I wrote that column in 1995, was that the material was starting to be lost. Veterans pass on, companies close or are taken over, personal and corporate material is discarded because of space limitations. I mentioned the loss of the Woodside albums and the deterioration of the Rough Range photos in the WA Newspapers warehouse. Recently, a friend told me of finding photos from the 1950s in a bin in their offices, discarded because they were "just old stuff and not very interesting".

Depositing material in a major archival institution, such as the WA State Library, will ensure that documents and other materials are stored and preserved correctly.

The Library already has considerable material on early and recent petroleum exploration, but there is much more that needs to be gathered.

"Of particular importance", says Dr Allen, "is the collection of oral histories. Imagine being able to hear, 50 years from now, the voice of someone describing historic moments like the Barrow Island discovery, as they saw them happen".

Nor is the collecting an end in itself. The material must be identified, sorted, catalogued, microfilmed or digitised for preservation, and stored. Equally as important, it must be organised and presented in a way that makes it accessible.

Much of this work is very labour-intensive - and it costs money. Funds are needed for the development and maintenance of the archive and, later, the preparation of presentational material, be it CD-ROMs or Internet displays for schools or general public use.

"There is little use in collecting all this new material if we don't have the money to

preserve it and do something with it", Dr Allen said. "The Save Our Century emphasis is on access as well as preservation."

The WA State Library Custodians have launched the Save Our Century Fund, and plan to raise \$5 million over the next three years as extra funding for the State Library, above the normal Government allocation.

I am pleased that the preliminary talks we've had to date with companies and individuals in our industry have been very fruitful, bringing offers of both material and financial support. Woodside and WAPET are both interested in contributing much of their own historical archives to the project.

PESA members are ultimately the players on stage, when the history of the oil and gas industry is featured, and I hope for your support too. Look through your photos and records, and see what might be useful for the archives. Encourage your company to contribute.

Remember in all of this, personal or corporate, that history isn't something decades ago. 1999 will be forty years ago when today's twenty-somethings retire. The collection is meant to bring our history up to the present, and then be maintained so that it is always current.

As a regular reminder, beginning with this issue, *PESA News* will have a 'A Glimpse of The Past' page that will feature photos from earlier times, and comments from the people involved. This issue has photos taken by Dr John Veevers during work in the Canning Basin in the mid-1950s. These are among the 300 slides John passed on to me several years ago.

Materials donated to the Save Our Century Fund may be eligible for taxation benefits under The Cultural Gifts Program of the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997* and cash donations to the Save Our Century Fund may also be eligible as tax deductions.

This is an exciting project but it will only be possible with industry support. We will be approaching companies, organisations and individuals in early 2000, and look forward to talking with many of you then.

In the interim, best wishes for the New Year - but save some partying for 31st December 2000, when the millennium really ends!

Peter Purcell