

By the Thousands Please

A picture is commonly said to be worth a thousand words. This actually represents a significant devaluation of the value of a photograph in the last 70 years: when Frederick Barnard coined the expression in 1927, a picture was worth ten thousand words. This column is about pictures - none worth less than 1000 words and many worth more than 10 000.

It is about pictures of us, of our history as Australia's petroleum explorers. More precisely - and I hope Eastern Staters will forgive my parochialism - it is about Western Australia's petroleum explorers.

I began collecting information and photos on the early petroleum exploration in WA when I started work here in 1967. The early efforts were focussed on the Canning Basin, and that increased after I came back, stimulated by the 1984 PESA Symposium. Subsequently, collecting photos for papers and talks introducing the North West Shelf and WA Basins symposia, I realised we were acquiring the beginnings of a valuable collection.

The photographs, from companies such as WAPET and individuals such as Tony Yeates and Doug Smith were important in themselves, but the real value came from their being gathered together. All these photographs and stories from our past must be collected before they are lost - and they will be, unless something is done about it now.



Grant - Range 1, 1956 (A Lindner)

Our history is within our reach at present, while so many of the pioneering generation are still alive. Nor is it only the 'old' guys whose files are important. My generation needs to remember that our work in the 1960s and 1970s is fast taking on the tints of history. In 20 years, the sixties will be half a century old.

Most of the photographs that record that history are in slide boxes and envelopes on back shelves of unused cupboards, and

they will age there and fade, and when we pass on, will be discarded by those who sort them. (Elwood Horstmann's wife commented recently to me that Elwood had lots of photos of 'rocks and hills' and the family didn't know what they were)

Even photographs in company collections are lost. Old reports are microfiched and the originals destroyed, for reasons of space. Changes of office are notorious for the loss of old files and photos. (When I last spoke to Geoff Donaldson, former Woodside Chairman, the photo and clippings albums from their early days in Victoria still had not been found).



Washday at Deep Bore, 1956 (A Lindner)

Where are the photographs of Rough Range, for example - that most cited of all moments in our beginnings? WAPET has some in its files. The best I've seen are in the private collection of Murray Johnstone. There are also very good photographs in the archives of West Australian Newspapers - wonderful old large-format negs, many now dried and cracked beyond repair, of Sir Charles Gairdner visiting the rig, the spudding of the follow-up wells, and such.

What of the moment when, in a sense, WAPET began WOODSIDE? It is 1953 and Nicholas Boutakoff is standing atop Cape Range, staring across the North West Shelf and beginning to imagine great structures and oilfields there. His guide was a young WAPET geologist called Murray Johnstone. So where is the photograph? ¹

Not all moments are so grand, but they are all our history, and we will lose them unless we gather them together now - and that is what Robyn and I propose to do. We don't mean to stockpile all the photographs taken; we want to collect the best of the images of our past, and ensure they are copied for long term preservation and properly catalogued.



Alan Wells and local Aboriginal clan, Canning stock Route, 1956 (Alan Casey)

WAPET has generously offered to support the project financially for three years. What we need now is the support of those PESA members and others who wrote that history, and can help us preserve it.

The photos will be available for use in future publications. Full credit will be given to the photographer or donor. It may be that PESA will want to publish a collection of photos in the future: in 2003, for instance. But the collecting must begin now and we ask you all to sort through those slides and photos and contact us. We will take care of the copying and cataloguing, and return originals, if that is wanted.

We know there is much history in Lakes Entrance and Roma and elsewhere, and hope others will take on that task. We don't know those places and aren't the ones to do that. At the same time, this project depends on many people no longer in WA: the pioneers are now far afield, in Australia and overseas.



WAPET mapping team, Canning Basin, 1972 (Courtesy of GSWA).

At this APEA, and afterwards, we look forward to talking with you.

Peter Purcell

¹ La Trobe Archives, State Library of Victoria, currently on loan to Battye Library, Perth.