

THE RIDE TO ROUGH RANGE RENAISSANCE

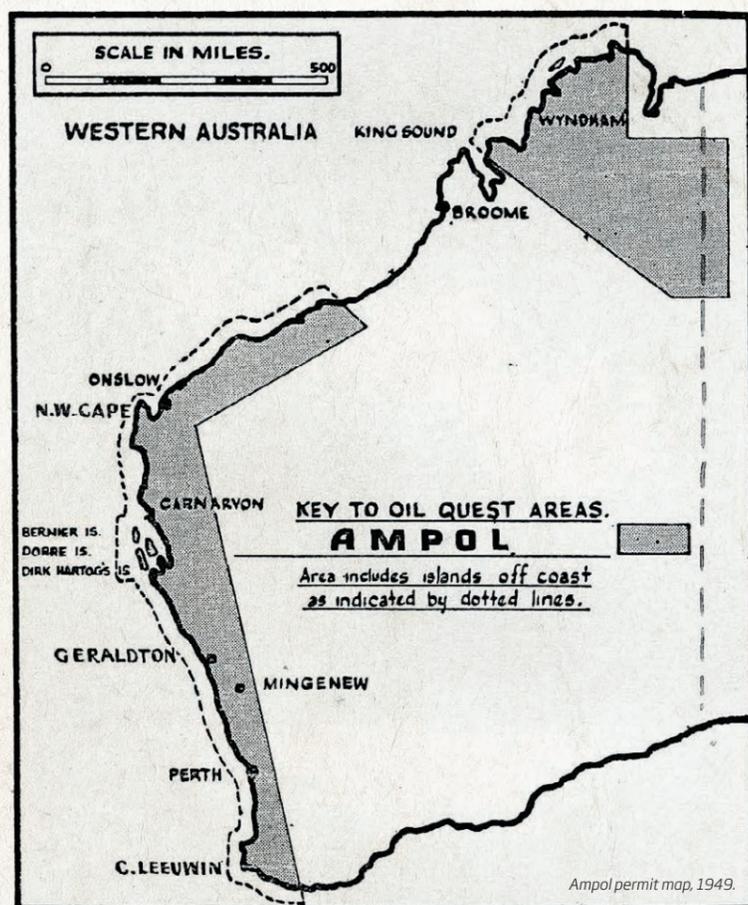
Ampol's 1949 announcement: 'Probable oil field in North West Australia'

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WAPET's 1953 Rough Range oil discovery is well known but the years of exploration that led to that historic well are less well documented, save for the summary in Rick Wilkinson's sweeping history of the Australian oil industry *A Thirst for Burning*. A 1949 Ampol Petroleum press release, found among famous WA geologist Murray Johnstone's papers, sheds interesting light on those early times.

The Ampol press release on April 20, 1949 contained two articles, *Oil Search in Western Australia* and *Probable Oilfield in North West Australia*, which discuss the early work by Richfield geologists. There are also 11 photos with captions and a permit map. All papers and photos were in the original envelope sent to Murray by the Ampol Advertising Department and all are in excellent condition. They will become part of the Murray Johnstone collection in the WA Library archives in 2017.

In 1946 William Walkley, then head of the Australian Motorists Petrol Company Limited (AMPCL), and keen to have his own crude oil supply, was advised by Harold Raggatt, Director of the Australian Bureau of Mineral Resources (BMR), that the best place to explore for oil was along the West Australian coast north of Carnarvon. A few months later, while visiting the USA in search of an experienced partner



for his proposed venture, Walkley discussed the area with Frank Morgan, Vice President Exploration at Richfield Corporation.

Later that year, Morgan came out to Australia and he and Walkley flew

over the region north of Carnarvon; the large anticlines in the Northwest Cape region were 'textbook' oil structures, Morgan wrote in his report.

AMPCL then successfully applied for permits covering over 1,000,000 km²



HIGH HOPES: One of the geological party takes a bearing. Exmouth Gulf is in the far background.

of onshore and offshore WA and the two companies began working together on further reconnaissance.

In 1947 Richfield sent geologists Mason Hill (later famous for 'discovering' the San Andreas Fault) and Paul Dudley to visit North West Cape and other areas. Hill's report declared that, of all the areas he visited, 'the possibility of discovering commercial oil and/or gas is probably best' in the Northwest Basin, as the Southern Carnarvon Basin was then known. 'A deep test bore at the apex of the Northwest Cape Anticline is a justifiable venture.'

In 1948, Richfield geologists Stanley Conrad and Robert Maynard conducted preliminary mapping of the structures at Northwest Cape, which they concluded was 'very promising for petroleum exploration'. The Cape Range structure, over 160km long and 40km wide, with over 300m closure, 'would furnish a huge area for accumulation

of oil'. The Rough Range structure was also promising, 'although dwarfed by the Cape anticline'. Detailed mapping of the region was recommended prior to any exploratory drilling.

The newly renamed Ampol Petroleum Limited (Ampol) and Richfield drafted a farm-in agreement and Richfield purchased the RAAF wartime facilities at Learmonth as an operating base. Then, to Ampol's surprise and disappointment, Richfield suddenly withdrew, ostensibly because of the large financial commitments for their new discovery in California's Cuyama Valley. Rick Wilkinson, in *A Thirst for Burning* suggests Richfield management was spooked by the politics inherent in Federal Labour Government's announced plans to nationalise the banking industry.

With Frank Morgan's help, Ampol quickly found replacement American partners in Signal Oil and Gas Co. and Hancock Oil Co., and the new mapping

program commenced in November 1948, with a team of four geologists led by the experienced American field geologist Eric Craig.

Craig was recently retired from Richfield and his work was conducted on contract with Signal Oil and Gas. His experience was critical because his team were not exactly hardened oilmen: Murray Johnstone and Brian Glennister were geology student-cadets on loan from the BMR and Jack Soufoulis was a geologist at the WA Geological Survey.

The team made a quick inspection of Cape Range, ostensibly the main target, and concluded the rough terrain was beyond their resources and time-frame. They set up camp at Rough Range and completed the mapping there in February 1949.

The release noted that mapping at Rough Range by the Craig team was in progress but did not discuss any



BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HYDROCARBON PLACE: Geologists inspecting rock strata for fossil specimens (Murray Johnstone at left).

details, except for a closing remark that 'the Rough Range structure bears close resemblance to the Kettleman Hills Dome, a famous producing field in California'.

Subsequently, both Signal Oil and Hancock withdrew from the venture, but in 1950, Ampol convinced Standard Oil of California and Texaco to send a geological team to inspect the Northwest Cape structures. Their guide was none other than Murray Johnstone, by then graduated and working for the BMR as a field geologist in the Carnarvon Basin. They liked what they saw, negotiated amendments to the Petroleum Act with the WA Government, and signed a contract with Ampol to form West Australian Petroleum Pty Ltd (WAPET). ▀

GEOLOGICAL GIANTS: The men that mapped Rough Range. Murray Johnstone, Jack Soufoulis, Brian Glennister, field hand, Eric Craig.

