

THE OTHER ROUGH RANGE STRIKE

 PETER PURCELL

THE discovery of oil in WAPET's Rough Range-1 well in 1953 is the stuff of history. So too is the fact that it proved to be 'the most fantastic hole-in-one in the history of oil exploration', as journalist Merton Woods put it in 1954 [quoted in Rick Wilkinson's *A Thirst for Burning*].

It was curiously Australian in that regard. Just as our explorers, pushing westward across the continent, found desert wastes and death and disappointment, instead of North America's broad rivers and sweeping grass plains, so did Rough Range-1 prove so much less than the gushers of Texas or the Middle East.

But there was another strike at Rough Range that has been little noticed and, being a labour strike, some might say that it was curiously Australian too!

Australian "roughnecks" on WAPET's drilling rig on the Rough Range-1 well (RR-1) commenced a 24-hour stop-work strike on 16 July 1954, as reported in *The West Australian* on Saturday, 17 July 1954. The men were demanding higher wages and were threatening to extend the strike.

Discontent over wages had been brewing among the roughnecks for some months and, after meetings among themselves in preceding days, they presented their demands, including substantial pay increases



Drillers at work on Rough Range. Picture: Murray Johnstone

and increased overtime provisions, to Field Superintendent Jack Stewart on 10 July,

[I suspect the root cause of the dispute was the different wage levels of the experienced American drillers and derrickmen, versus the relatively less experienced Australian roughnecks. Two of the leaders of the strike had overseas experience, in Borneo and the Middle East respectively, and may well have enjoyed higher expatriate wages there.]

Spokesmen for the roughnecks later told *The West Australian* they'd sent a letter to the company on May 24, making 'certain suggestions about money' but had received no reply.

WAPET General manager Jim Thomas said that no such letter had been received from the men until July 10, when it was presented to Stewart.

After several meetings with the strikers' spokesmen, Stewart flew to Perth on the 11th to confer with WAPET senior management. He returned to the rig-site on Thursday the 15th and presented 'certain concessions' to the strikers.

They rejected these concessions as inadequate and, at a meeting on Friday the 16th, voted to strike at the Rough Range-1 site for 24 hours commencing at 3 pm. If an acceptable offer was not received within the 24 hours, the strike would be extended, and the Rough

Range-2 rig crew would join them. Only the roughnecks from RR-1 were involved in the strike.

Superintendent Stewart acted quickly to take control of the situation. All American personnel (drillers and derrickmen) were ordered to RR-1 rig, then at 3045 m, to commence running-in-hole and circulating until the dispute was resolved. RR-2, at 186 m, with surface casing just cemented, was shut down immediately.

Stewart also immediately closed the bar. The canteen remained open, although the cook threatened to join the strike if there was any drilling in RR-1.

In Perth, General Manager Jim Thomas also moved quickly. He met with the Employers' Federation on Friday and discussed the roughnecks' wages and working conditions. He told *The West Australian* that he had been assured by the Employers' Federation that both wages and working conditions were more than generous.

Based on that assurance, WAPET appears to have decided to oppose the strike. Thomas announced that 'in order to prevent a shutdown of operations... technical personnel in the field would take over the duties of the rotary helpers'. American drilling personnel on standby for the Cape Range-1 well were made ready to mobilize to RR-1 site.

To this point, relations at Rough Range had been relatively cordial, outwardly at least. *The West Australian* reporter at the wellsite said 'the dispute has been aired in a friendly manner and in the



mess hall at evening meal strikers and company executives mingled without rancour'. The men were passing the time by catching up on the laundry, reading, and playing cards or table tennis. With the bar closed, 'soft drinks were in keen demand'.

That cordiality was about to end.

On Saturday morning, July 18, before the 24-hour strike was over, Stewart mustered the men shortly after dawn, complimented them on their orderly behaviour during the strike, and then issued his ultimatum: work or leave.

'Drilling will be resumed on No.1 rig immediately after this meeting', he is quoted as saying by *The West*

Australian, Monday 19 July. 'Crews will get their gloves and report at 9am ready to go on shift.'

'Those of you not prepared to work will immediately pack your belongings and be ready to leave the company property by 9 am.'

Nine men elected to return to Perth. Based on the photo taken by Murray Johnstone, they left the camp in high spirits, doubtless convinced they had achieved a major victory for the workers. Both rigs were working by mid-morning.

A photograph of the men boarding their flight to Perth was on the front page of the 19 July *The West Australian*. Also shown was a photo of Manfred Stickel, obviously a budding entrepreneur among the remaining roughnecks, who recognized a business opportunity and purchased clothes from the departing crew.



AUTHOR'S COMMENT: *Union demands and delays on Western Australian oil and gas projects have cost the petroleum industry and the nation enormous amounts of money over the decades. A detailed history of this first strike in a West Australian 'oilfield' might make a very worthwhile project for a post-graduate thesis in history or industrial relations. ▀*