

OIL SANDS PIONEERS: HISTORIC ABASAND

In 1930, Max Ball, an American, and his associates formed Canadian Northern Oil Sand Product Ltd., which later became Abasand Oils Ltd. Ball was granted a federal lease on the Horse River and began negotiations with the province to erect and operate a separation plant capable of handling a minimum of 250 tons of oil sand per day. Site clearing began in January 1936.

The plant officially opened September 1, 1936. It was operating on a regular basis by 1941, and produced 200 barrels per day between May and November that year. In total, 19,000 tons of oil sand was mined in 1941. The mining method found to be most effective involved drilling holes in the oil sand where blasting powder was inserted and triggered. The loosened sand was then loaded directly onto dump trucks and hauled to the separation plant.

In November 1941, a fire broke out in the Abasand powerhouse. The plant was rebuilt in 1942 with an even greater capacity for operation. An enlarged pipeline and haul road to Waterways was completed.

In 1943, during World War II, the federal government grew concerned about potential fuel shortages in the west. They took control of the Abasand plant under the *War Measures Act*. George Webster was then appointed to redesign and reconstruct the operation.

In June 1945, a second disastrous fire was caused by a welder's torch, destroying most of the plant. Flames spread to the nearby forest and threatened the bunkhouses and an explosives area. The federal government abandoned the site in May 1946 since the need for fuel diminished after the end of World War II. Attempts by company shareholders to restart the plant operation were unsuccessful.

In the months of July and August, staff of the Oil Sands Discovery Centre leads guided walking tours of the Historic Abasand Site.

Sources:

Comfort, Darlene J. [The Abasand Fiasco](#). Edmonton: Friesen Printers, 1980

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Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1989.