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Gas Well in Dexter

In May 1903, near Dexter in south central Kansas, drillers for the Gas Oil and Developing Company struck gas at a depth of 500 feet. Conservative estimates placed the flow at 9,000,000 feet daily, and called it the strongest one ever discovered in Kansas.

Telephone and telegraph wires spread the news to the surrounding towns. Although neighboring Winfield doubted the claims, the afternoon train brought men who assured their friends that Dexter's well was "as a cyclone to a mild wind compared with theirs."

Stock was quickly sold, real estate prices grew, and several new enterprises were projected. Citizens of Dexter were so excited by the potential of the gas that the town decided to hold a large celebration, the grand finale of which would be the lighting of the flame. The entire town gathered at the well as the mayor made a speech proclaiming the wonders the well would bring. He then ordered a burning bale of hay to be placed in the well. Instead of the gas catching flame, as all expected, the fire on the bale was put out. This process was repeated several times, but always the flames would be extinguished. Dexter's dreams of becoming an industrial metropolis were blown out with them. For two years the scornful name of "wind gas" was applied to the Dexter gas.

Eventually Erasmus Haworth, the state geologist, became interested in this odd gas and sent samples to the University of Kansas to be analyzed by David F. McFarland. Analysis showed that the reason the gas would not burn was that it contained large amounts of non-combustible helium. Previously it had been thought that helium only existed in the gasses that made up the sun. The discovery of this gas exiting on earth was met with great excitement in chemistry societies, but the gas was still considered of no use since it would not burn.

It wasn't until 1917, at the suggestion of Sir William Ramsay of England, that helium was used in military balloons. These blimps, filled with helium, were a major asset to the United States during World War II. However it was 1927 before Dexter had a helium extracting plant and was able to capitalize on its gas discovery. Since then dirigibles, nuclear reactors, and ballistic missiles have kept the industry alive although today the original Dexter well no longer produces.

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