

THE BROWN COUNTY OIL BOOM
AND
ITS IMPACTS
1982-1985

An Abstract of a Thesis

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by
George Huseman
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the economic and environmental impacts of the 1982 oil strike and its resulting activity on Brown County, Illinois, in general, and especially on the city of Mt. Sterling, where most of the oil businesses were located. In the course of doing preliminary research for this topic two premises were formulated. The first premise was that the oil boom in Brown County, Illinois had an identifiable geographic impact on the region and its county seat, Mt. Sterling, and that the oil boom of the 1980s was markedly more beneficial to the area and its inhabitants than detrimental. The second premise was that the oil boom had two categories of impact: A. Economic; and B. Landscape.

Although Western Illinois is not noted as a major region of petroleum production, the area did experience a full-fledged oil boom in 1982-1983, based mainly on a newly discovered, shallow field in Brown County. There had been an oil boom in the area in 1959-1961, but this new boom far surpassed the earlier boom in every respect. Brown County, and especially Mt. Sterling, were the main beneficiaries of the economic activity, but there was a small ripple effect as exploration and exploitation occurred in the neighboring counties of Adams and Schuyler.

The activity associated with the oil boom had a tremendous effect on Brown County, perhaps more so than had a boom of similar magnitude taken place elsewhere. For years Brown County had been in decline. The county had a small population base, and this had grown smaller almost every decade. The economy was heavily based on agriculture which was suffering badly by the early- 1980s. In desperation the local residents had strongly supported efforts to persuade the state to locate a prison within the boundaries of the county, but this failed. The coming of the oil discovery, and its subsequent boom, offered new hope.

New people and businesses came to town, and for a while the economic activity seemed to justify the expectations held by many people. Empty offices and storage buildings were rented and some new buildings were built to meet the need for commercial space. The town's only motel was filled to capacity and residential rentals were at a premium. Some local businesses saw spectacular growth. Local governmental agencies were busier than at any time in the recent past. Local landowners benefitted from the leasing of their land to exploration companies. The boom peaked rather quickly, however, and within two years the situation had practically returned to the pre-boom status.

The oil boom produced far more benefits than drawbacks for Brown County. The infusion of money into the local economy was especially timely. Potential problems were generally handled before they grew out of proportion. People were excited and optimistic about the future. Many of the negative aspects that are often associated with economic booms did not take place. There was no great upsurge in crime. In general, the oil workers who came to town were well behaved. Although the boom lasted for a much shorter period than many people would have hoped, very few people were sorry the discovery had been made.