

## Pandora's Well

by Brian Keith Day

Five thousand feet and a century past marked the depth and time at which the black tar with a life of its own first squirmed to the top of a well casing in the Mississippi Delta. Those rig hands knew right off that the substance was not any familiar form of petroleum what-so-ever. The black tar wriggled together in contractions like cramped muscles, squirming upon the deck of the rig, instead of complacently forming pools in the bottom of a barrel. In some patches, the substance swelled and fell as if a lung had formed within the muck. Bolder rig hands took steel bars to poke the swellings, and the bars curled up like strips of dandelion stem dropped into water. The men touched the bars to see if they were hot. The bars crumbled away like three-day-old bread. Fingers that had touched the bars went numb and useless by the next morning - a permanent condition.

After the bars had disintegrated, most of the men fled the drilling rig in terror. Those that remained, closed the well site down for the remainder of the day. Upon returning the following morning, they found the derrick slumped over to one side where

the black ooze had dissolved much of the supporting iron. As the men watched, the ooze wriggled in fingers and stretched out in short strands to expand the ground which it covered. Earth was piled up in dikes to contain the ooze, with limited success. The ooze would manage to creep up over a less compact section of the embankment and begin to claim new territory. The impoundments began again at the breach. Soon, the afflicted area resembled a spiraling, circular, maze, much like a ring worm upon the earth. More men were brought to the site, black men so poor that they would take any work to feed themselves and their families.

Most of these black men held simple but strong Southern Baptist beliefs. Many had grown up in a life steeped in the practices of voodoo. As desperate as they were for wages, the ooze still terrified them. In those days, white men still held strong control over the lives of the grandchildren of slaves. Guns appeared in the white ranks behind the black workers. The Klan rode freely in the night. In the sweltering afternoon of the third day, when the ooze had broken the impoundment in three places at once, when the black men were driven to heave at the hard clay soil with all of their might against their crippling terror, they began to sing a Spiritual to distract their horror-gripped minds. As they sang, the ooze halted its advance. Slowly, it began to recede back down the long spirals of the trenches.

“Push in the banks behind it!” shouted the Captains behind their desperate workers. A man slipped on the darkened clay at the brink of the dike and tumbled into the congealing ooze. He opened his mouth to scream, but his body shriveled to black leather before any cry was emitted. His flattened corpse floated on the surface of the ooze like the crushed silhouette of a dead animal after many days upon a hardtop road.

The men sang louder and shoveled the dirt in faster. One man reached out with his spade to drag the wafered body from the black evil. To his surprise the shovel did not crumble.

At the center of the spiral, where the well casing still protruded from the twisted wreckage of the derrick, the black ooze began to slide reluctantly back down the pipe into the bowels of the earth. One stout fellow among the workers, who must have been a preacher of some sort from their congregation, stood on the top of the dike where the ooze receded grudgingly, and began to recite from the Scripture. As he recounted the Twenty-third Psalm, the ooze took on new animation and began to retreat desperately. Earth could not be thrust into the ditches fast enough to keep pace with its withdrawal. The ruined drilling rig shook violently with the writhing force of the black evil as it squirmed its way into the mouth of the casing. Soon, the last few hundred gallons of the menacing substance waited for passage into the earth, in a restless, slowly seething, blob at the center of the earthen maze. All eyes watched the viscous black mass as it struggled to form tubular coils in anticipation of its escape from the sermon and the singing. All voices bellowed out the hymns from parched throats as the men continued to pile up the ramparts.

Suddenly, a white man appeared from the tangled mess of the drilling rig, carrying an oil drum. He stepped to the mouth of the pipe and, in one fluid motion, slid the open barrel in front of the pipe, and slammed an iron cap over the mouth of the casing. In its haste to escape the music of redemption, the black ooze continued to coil into the rapidly filling cask.

“Bring me more barrels!” the man shouted over his shoulder, and more white men trundled waiting drums up the bank beside the distorted derrick.

“Sing, you bastards, sing!” snarled the Captains to the laborers who had halted in shock at the sight of the efforts of the men at the well head.

Gun barrels glinted in the blazing delta sun. Whips cracked through the smothering heat. The preacher began another recitation of the scripture in a thundering voice. His exhausted flock again picked up their shovels and their spiritual. A black thunderhead slid across the face of the sun and glided swiftly like a gigantic bat toward the site of turmoil. Still the ooze piled into the waiting barrels and lids were hammered into place as each vessel filled. A wind began to whip the trees and grasses around the well site. Thunder grumbled beneath the menacing cloud, while tiny roots of lightning flickered tentatively from the billowing vapors, reaching for the earth.

Finally, all of the horrid black ooze, except one barrelful, had been trapped within the steel drums. The preacher screamed out one final oath of a biblical passage and his voice cracked into silence as the last of the black ooze slid over the lip of the last barrel. A lid was hastily pounded into place and secured with a steel band and the singing ceased. For one moment the world halted all motion in silence, then a mighty bolt of lightning burst forth from the heart of the sky and struck the head of the well pipe, twisting it up like a section of bridge cable and killing all who stood within thirty yards of the strike.

Twenty, grim, black barrels stood on end in the center of the new crater. Twenty men lay dead around the casks. All survivors stood in silent terror from what they had just witnessed. One pale needle of a man, dressed entirely in black, strode through the motionless crowd into the pit of dead and barrels. As if the corpse were merely old clothing stuffed with loose cotton, the strangler slipped his hands beneath the armpits of

the first body that he came to, picked it up, and stretched it out on top of the nearest barrel. Moving on to each body in turn, he repeated his careful posing of the dead, until all of the slain men lay across the banded lids of the barrels. No voice spoke, nor a shovel rattled in protest, as all watched the solemn efforts of the tall, pale man. When the last dead man in the pit rested upon the last barrel, the darkly clad stranger turned to the crowd of laborers on the lip of the crater and gestured with a long, boney, index finger of each hand to the two men closest to him. He pointed to the inert body of the postulator of scripture, where it lay motionless a stride down from the brink. As if hypnotized, the two men stepped to the lifeless minister and dragged him by his arms down into the pit to stop in front of the silent stranger.

“Place him across the others on the barrels. Place him in the center,” commanded the tall man.

For an instant, the preacher’s eyelids fluttered open. His mouth gapped open as if to protest. Gently, the tall man pushed his jaw closed with one hand and brushed his lids down over the frightened eyes with the other. He held his palms on the man’s face for a few seconds and then released his grip. He nodded to the two attendants. The two men acquiesced to his previous direction, placing the inert body gently onto the macabre assemblage in the center of the lightning-blasted pit.

With this final action, the glowering clouds above the scene broke loose with torrents of rain. Lightning lashed the land around the crowd of men peering into the pit, while ceaseless, deafening thunder shook the ground beneath their feet. The trance of the dark stranger broken by the rain, the surviving men cowered toward the ground and fled the devastated well site in babbling terror. Any who might have dared to cast one glance

backward, as Lot's wife had done at the destruction of Gomorrah, would have seen that the torrential rain had rapidly filled the pit with baptismal water until only the tall man's head could be seen protruding above the pool.

The End