

Benjamin Taylor Kavanaugh, and the Discovery of East Texas Oil

S. W. Geiser

Dr. WILLIAM BATTLE PHILLIPS, in his monograph on Petroleum in Texas (University of Texas Mineralogical Survey, *Bulletin 1*, 1900) has given an excellent account, generally considered, of exploration for petroleum in Texas, especially in the period 1883-1900. Subsequent developments in Texas oil have been well covered in papers by other geologists for the years 1900-1914 (U. S. Geological Survey, *Bulletins 212, 282, 429*). Antedating all of these, Joseph B. Walker (Geological Survey of Texas, *Second Annual Report, 1890, 1891, 272-73*) gives an account (to which the reader is referred) of the first prospecting and drilling for oil in the Nacogdoches field. (It is notable that the earliest wells in this area were drilled by John Franklin Carll (1828-1904), known throughout the world for his part in the establishment of the science of petroleum-geology.) Stuart McGregor (*Texas Almanac, 1941-42, 227*) has also voiced the general position (first stated by Walker) that the first commercial discovery of oil in Texas "came about 1867," with the discovery by Peyton F. Edwards and Amory Starr¹ of oil on Oil Springs Branch, about 15 miles southeast of Nacogdoches.

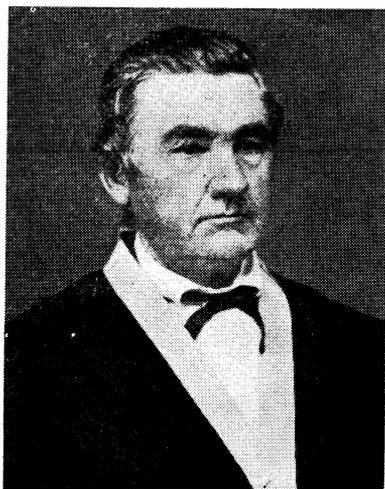
From these writers, one easily gets the impression that little or no serious prospecting for oil was done in East Texas before the work of J. F. Carll and B. F. Hitchcock. In the present note I desire to point out a few observations on earlier explorations, and to give information on one of the earlier prospectors.

Charles Albert Warner (1939) in his fine *Texas Oil and Gas since 1543*, has given a summary and detailed account of earlier prospecting for oil in Texas than that of Starr

¹Mrs. Amory Starr is listed in *Cassino's Naturalists' Directory* for 1880, as an amateur geologist living at Nacogdoches. She is not included in any earlier or later issue of the *Directory*. Walker states that Amory Starr was a resident of Maysland (?Maysfield, in Milam County?) in 1890; and Peyton F. Edwards (1844-1918) grandson of the empresario Haden Edwards and Colonel John Forbes, is well known in later Texas history. Edwards was a trustee of Nacogdoches University in 1873.

and Edwards. About 1859-60, says Warner, Jack Graham dug an oil pit near Tar Springs in southern Angelina County; similarly, Lynis T. Barrett discovered oil in the Melrose region. He, with three associates, secured in 1859 an oil-lease from the heirs of Isaac C. Skillern (on the east side of Mast Creek, in the old Chireno grant, in Nacogdoches County). The Civil War intervening, it was not until October 9, 1865, under a new lease, that Barrett began to dig for oil. The next year he went to Pennsylvania, and secured the services of J. F. Carll, who bored two wells on Barrett's

concessions (one of 106 feet, with a capacity of ten barrels, and a dry hole of 80 feet). Since the returns were slight (compared with Pennsylvania wells), and since proper financing could not be had, Carll returned to the North, and for a decade oil development in Eastern Texas was in abeyance. So much for Warner's account.



Dr. B. T. Kavanaugh (1805-85)

Nevertheless, the year 1866 saw the incorporation of four companies for the exploitation of oil in East Texas: the "Texas Oil, Iron, Mining & Manufacturing Company", of Houston, September 20; the "East Texas Petroleum and Mining Company", October 3; "The San Augustine Petroleum Company", October 24; and the "Melrose Petroleum Oil, Mining, and Manufacturing Company" of Waco, November 2. Later, on December 2, 1871, "The Cherokee Mining Company" of Rusk was incorporated, to mine coal, lead, petroleum, etc., within Cherokee, Anderson, Houston, and Angelina Counties. This earlier activity indicates extensive prospecting for oil before 1866. S. B. Buckley in his "First Annual Report of the Geological and Agricultural Survey of Texas", (1874, pp. 45-46), mentions the discovery of oil in

Nacogdoches County, and boring for the same, some years antecedent to his report. His "Preliminary Report of the Texas Geological Survey . . ." (1866, pp. 29-30) mentions, correctly, the occurrence of "bitumen" in several parts of Texas, and opines that in southern and eastern Texas "we have large quantities of petroleum-making materials; and the coal oil or bitumen which exudes from beneath the surface in various sections, affords conclusive evidence that its streams or reservoirs are in the depths below. Those who are fortunate enough to tap them will realize fortunes." But he says nothing of L. T. Barrett's prospecting.

The existence of "tar springs" and other oil indications had been known in Texas for many years before Buckley's day, however. Warner has given illustrations of this from Spanish days. William Kennedy (*Texas; its Geography, Natural History, and Topography . . .*, 1844, 68, 69-70) had pointed out the frequent occurrence of "sea wax" (a kind of asphaltum or petroleum-residuum) along the coast of Galveston Island, cast up by the sea. Early travellers also pointed out "oil slicks" at Sabine Pass. In 1860, G. P. Wall, professor at the Government School of Mines in London, in one of his publications (he quoted from Richard Cowling Taylor's *Statistics of Coal*, 1855) mentioned the bitumen or asphaltum (*maltha*) that occurs in the Sour Lake region of Hardin County, and stated that in the center of the lake petroleum continually "boiled up" from the depths. It is a certainty (as has been stated before) that some knowledge of the existence of oil and oil residues in Texas has been current from the remote Spanish period. But the question emerges, as to who were the early prospectors for oil in East Texas whose findings stimulated the activity to organize petroleum companies in 1866. The discoveries of Starr and Edwards, in 1867, cannot be the cause of the earlier incorporations.

Oil springs similar to those found by Graham, Barrett, Starr, and Edwards had, of course, long been known elsewhere in America. Springs exuding petroleum were noticed by explorers of the late eighteenth century, in western Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky. Dr. S. P. Hildreth, of Marietta,

Ohio (*Amer. J. Sci.*, (I) 24, 1833, 63-65) described the occurrence of oil near Seneca Lake, N. Y., and near Charleston, on the Big Kanawha, frequently associated with salt wells. Earlier (in 1829) the famous "American Well" was bored near Burkesville, Cumberland County, Ky., with a resultant flow of about a thousand barrels daily, that continued up to about 1860. The oil flowed into the Cumberland River. It was set on fire by a boy, and burned at the surface for about fifty-six miles (*Niles' Weekly Register*, (IV) 1, 1829, 4). Oil springs were known to exist near Titusville, Pa., as early as 1854, but it was not until August 18, 1859, that E. L. Drake's famous Titusville well "came in." The rest of the history of oil discovery and development in Pennsylvania and the northern part of the United States is well known. The general knowledge of oil in Texas, up to 1880, is well summarized in a letter (written by Nathaniel Alston Taylor to Stephen F. Peckham), published in Peckham's report on Petroleum in the tenth volume of the 1880 U. S. Census reports.

I have tried to follow, in newspapers, oil prospecting in eastern Texas in the period immediately after the Civil War, but the almost complete lack of files of local newspapers of that time has made it impossible to do so.²

The great British-American chemist, John William Mallet, F.R.S., while professor of chemistry in the medical department of the University of Louisiana, made a survey for petroleum in Louisiana and Texas, "after the Civil War for a group of Northern capitalists." (*D.A.B.*, s.v. "J. W. Mallet.") This, I surmise, was in 1865. No practical results or publications seem to have come from his investigations, so far as I can discover.

The most articulate explorer of East Texas oil fields—the man whose work appears to have caused the incorporation of a number of oil companies in that section—was a Kentuckian, BENJAMIN TAYLOR KAVANAUGH (1805-88). He came to Texas in 1865, a Methodist minister, professor in

²See "Texas Newspapers, 1813-1939" (*Publications of the San Jacinto Museum of History Association*, 1, 1941) and note the non-existence of papers of the 1865-75 period for Tyler, Jacksonville, Henderson, Palestine, Nacogdoches, and San Augustine.

Soule University at Chappell Hill. During the three years of his stay in Washington County, Kavanaugh seems to have explored a good deal of East Texas. He was in the Sour Lake district, at San Augustine, and in other parts of East Texas, and with a divining-rod (!), which he called a "mineraloger", he explored for petroleum, coal, and other mineral deposits. (See p. 49 of his *Lectures on Astronomy and Kindred Subjects . . .*, 1878, *infra*.) Kavanaugh had long been interested in mineralogy, and in 1859 had presented to the St. Louis Academy of Sciences a collection of minerals from Santa Fé.

Kavanaugh was one of the incorporators of the San Augustine Petroleum Company (October 24, 1866); and there is no doubt that his activity and newspaper articles³ of the day were largely responsible for the contemporary interest in potential oil in East Texas.

Biographical notices of B. T. Kavanaugh have been printed in A. H. Redford, *Life and Times of H. H. Kavanaugh, D.D. . . .*, 1884, 56-61; Knight, in *Library of Southern Literature*, 15, 1910, 232; *The South in the Building of the Nation*, 12, 1909, 28-29; and also Wynn, *Southern Literature: Selections and Biographies*, 1932, 375-76; but most of these are but pourings from one vial to another, and are in many details erroneous. Like many of the subjects of biography in these Southern publications, he is uncritically praised. Kavanaugh (needless to say, from what has gone before) was no true man of science; rather was he, like Edward Fontaine, a *sciolist* with a divining-rod. Yet his life is of exceptional interest: his career and thought were so largely shaped by his frontier environment, both in the Northwest and in Texas, that it would be well to set forth briefly what is *known* of his life. He lived in Texas from the close of the Civil War to the year 1881, when, blind and superannuated, he returned to his native Kentucky, where he died in 1888.

Benjamin Taylor Kavanaugh, son of Williams Kavanaugh, a Protestant Episcopal clergyman, was born in Jef-

³Kavanaugh wrote a number of newspaper articles on petroleum in early Texas; an unidentified clipping (?from a Beaumont paper, in the seventies?) states that 'some day a great oil field will be developed in the valley of the Neches.'

person County, Kentucky, April 28, 1805. His father died in October, 1806. His widowed mother, with her five sons and one daughter, then went to live with a brother in Clarke County (of which Winchester is the county seat) from 1806 to 1812. In 1812 Kavanaugh's mother remarried, and removed to Cynthiana, Harrison County. In 1815 the boy was apprenticed to learn the bookbinder's trade with the Rev. John Lyle, a noted Presbyterian preacher and educator of Paris, Bourbon County. Benjamin's older brother, Hubbard Hinde Kavanaugh (later a Methodist bishop) was at the same time apprenticed to Lyle to learn the printer's trade. Benjamin remained with Lyle some two years; in 1816 (for a short time) he was apprenticed to Stephen P. Norton of Lexington, Ky., also to the book-binder's trade. In 1817, he was bound for seven years to learn the trade of tanner and currier, "to the Messrs. Barr" (?Robert and Thomas Barr, of Lexington?), along with his younger brother, Williams Barbour Kavanaugh.

In 1819 this brother and he were converted in a Methodist camp meeting in Clarke County. Four years later, he "bought out his time" with the Messrs. Barr, and shortly thereafter entered the tobacco trade between Louisville and New Orleans. He engaged in this trade from about 1824 to 1827. In the spring of 1827 he married. Next year he was "licensed to exhort", and in 1829, to preach (which he did at Mount Carmel, Ill., where his brother LeRoy lived and died, also a Methodist minister.) During the years 1830-34 he was missionary for the American Sunday School Union, travelling all over the state of Illinois, building up Sunday schools in poorer places, and helping to establish Sunday school libraries.

During this time, in Illinois, his son, Thomas Hinde Kavanaugh (1832-67) (later to be professor of natural science at Soule University in Texas) was born. The years 1832 and 1833 were for Kavanaugh troubled ones: society in the Northwest was disorganized by the Cholera, which swept over the country, and decimated the population, especially in the larger towns.

In 1835 he joined the Illinois Conference of the Methodist Church (it then comprised present Illinois and Wisconsin) and for four years acted as financial Agent for the newly-founded McKendree College at Lebanon, St. Clair County, east of Saint Louis. He served during the last years of the presidency of Peter Akers (1791-1886), who was succeeded (1837) by John Wesley Merrill (1808-1900), a graduate of Wesleyan University in Connecticut. As agent for the college, Kavanaugh proposed to endow it by the sale of scholarships; but disturbed financial conditions of the country during 1837 and subsequent years made the subscribers unable to pay their notes. (The same plan was tried years later—in 1854—but again failed of good results.)

At the end of the year 1839, Kavanaugh was transferred to the newly-organized Rock River Conference of his church, and was appointed superintendent of the Indian Missions District of the Sioux and Chippewas at the head of the Mississippi River (a district that would be included, roughly, in the present triangle of Minneapolis-Chippewa Falls-Lake Pepin). He was superintendent of the Indian Mission District for three years. In 1842 he was transferred to be presiding elder of the Platteville District for three years. During these years he helped organize the Masonic Grand Lodge of Wisconsin, and was the first Grand Master, for the years 1844 and 1845.

In 1846 he "located", ecclesiastically; acted as Agent in Illinois and Indiana for the American Colonization Society and studied medicine at the Rush Medical College in Chicago. During the years 1848-49, he lived in Indianapolis, edited "*The Family Visitor*"—a weekly periodical of the "Sons of Temperance"—and studied medicine. (His son, Thomas Hinde Kavanaugh, then a boy of sixteen, became much interested in the temperance movement, and during the years he lived in Saint Louis—1850-65—was an active worker of the "Sons of Temperance" in that city.)

Early in 1850, Benjamin T. Kavanaugh settled in Saint Louis, Mo., after having taken the M.D. degree in the first class (1850) of the medical school of the Indiana Asbury University (DePauw), at Greencastle. For six and a half

years he practiced medicine in Saint Louis, and was professor of obstetrics and gynecology in the "Medical Department of the University of the State of Missouri" (1852-54). This medical school granted B. T. Kavanaugh (1852) the M.D. degree *ad eundem*; and from this school his son, Thomas H. Kavanaugh, received the M.D. degree in 1854.

In 1857, B. T. Kavanaugh gave up the general practice of medicine, and re-entered the Saint Louis Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (of which his brother, Hubbard Hinde Kavanaugh, had been elected bishop in 1854). For two years Benjamin was pastor at Lexington, Mo., and in 1859 was appointed to a "charge" at Independence. He served here two years—1860 and 1861. In December, 1861, he joined the First Brigade, Missouri Volunteers, C.S.A., under Brigadier General M. E. Green. For two years he acted as army chaplain and then served (1863-65) as missionary to the army. He also served as surgeon in a field hospital.

Early in 1865 he transferred ecclesiastically to the Texas Conference of the Methodist Church, and was stationed at Chappell Hill. He "spent most of the years 1865 and 1866 in exploring a part of Eastern Texas for petroleum and other mineral deposits" (*supra*). Soule University (opened in 1856) had suffered severely from the War; it was now (1865) attempting to "carry on" under James M. Follansbee (acting-president in 1856-58). Follansbee, in the fall of 1865, transferred to the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Church, and was succeeded by Rev. O. H. McOmber, president in 1866-67. Kavanaugh was preacher at Chappell Hill in 1866, and served also as "professor of intellectual and moral science", while his son, Thomas Hinde Kavanaugh, was professor of natural science. Benjamin T. Kavanaugh was actively interested in natural science as he understood it. During the year 1866, he gave a lecture before Soule University on a topic that had interested him from his earliest days in Illinois—"Electricity the Motor Power of the Solar System". Some years later, this lecture (now expanded into four) was repeated before the Houston Lyceum; and after some years published and extensively circulated.⁴

The next year was one of tragedy for Kavanaugh; for Chappell Hill was visited by the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867, and his son, Professor Kavanaugh, and his only unmarried daughter were among the 93 white people who succumbed to the disease in that locality. Soule University was closed all summer and fall, and did not reopen until January 4, 1868. At the Conference of 1867, Kavanaugh was appointed to a Methodist church at Houston; and he remained in that city, and at suburban missions near Houston, until 1877, when he served the Shearn Church in Galveston.

In the meantime, he had taken up again his Masonic activities which had been more or less in suspense since he left Saint Louis in 1861. On January 11, 1871, he affiliated with Holland Lodge No. 1, of Houston, and remained a member of that lodge until he left Texas, ten years later. He was Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Texas in 1873; and during the years 1872-73, edited *The Masonic Mirror* in Houston. Three years previously he had edited *The Family Visitor* (which seems to have been issued from 1869 to 1871). Like his Indianapolis publication of the same name (1850) this also was an organ of the "Sons of Temperance." In 1878 Kavanaugh took a "supernumerary" relation to his church conference, and was left without an appointment. The same year, he published his 63-page pamphlet, *Lectures on Astronomy...*, which was expanded into a 241-page book, his *Electric Theory of Astronomy...*, published in 1886.

B. T. Kavanaugh served churches at Hempstead and Hockley, in 1879 and 1880. His wife died in 1880, and (since he had become blind) he was superannuated. In May, 1881, he returned to Kentucky, where he again married, and served several charges until finally superannuated, a year or two before his death (which occurred at Boonsborough, on July 3, 1888).

⁴Kavanaugh (*Wilford's Microcosm*, 2, 1883, 230-32) says that a thousand copies were printed and distributed. This doubtless was the 1878 pamphlet, listed below.

PUBLICATIONS: Numerous newspaper articles; editorial articles in *The Family Visitor* of Indianapolis and Houston, and *The Masonic Mirror* of Houston;

Lectures on Astronomy and Kindred Subjects based upon the Electric Theory: or, The motions of the heavenly bodies; the polarity of the earth; the inclination of the poles; all atmospheric phenomena; together with the development and growth of animals and plants, accounted for upon the principle of electric attraction and repulsion. By B. T. Kavanaugh, M.D., D.D. Cincinnati: Printed by Hitchcock & Walden, for the Author. 1878. 63 p. 8vo. (c1878);

The Electric Theory of Astronomy. By B. T. Kavanaugh. . . . With an introduction by Rev. R. H. Rivers. . . . Cincinnati, Printed for the Author by Cranston & Stowe, 1886. 241 p., 12mo.;

Twelve numbered essays, with the general title, "Electricity the Motor Power of the Solar System", published in v. 2 of *Wilford's Microcosm*, 1882/3; and two essays on the same general theme, in v. 3, 1883/4, p. 45-47 and 234-36, of the same journal.