

Memories of the Life of Irvin J. Vawter
By Maureen Neal

It was a cold February day. The drive to my apartment from my parents was drab and mundane. I was looking forward to a warm bath and snuggling in to watch a movie. My roommate was in her room reading when I arrived home, so I prepared for my bath. As the phone rang I felt both irritated and anxious at the same time. It was my mother. Her usual upbeat, cheerful voice sounded much different than it did 2 hours ago. Her father, my grandfather had been in an accident. He wasn't hurt in the accident but while waiting for the police he suffered a major heart attack and died. I stood there stunned, then told her I would be right home and hung up.

Driving home my mind was not on the road, rather in a kind of auto-pilot since I had driven this route too many times. My mind drifted to my grandfather. Irvin Vawter, a man that in my eyes was bigger than life. Irvin was a "make it happen" type of guy. He knew what he was doing no matter what obstacles got in the way. And everyone who knew him was going to miss him imminently.

Irvin was an oil man. It was in his blood. It started when he was a youth, merely 16 yrs old. (These of course are stories I was told when I was young. How accurate they are I am uncertain, but some have been documented in newspaper articles.) He worked in gas stations, which back in those days were also the mechanics garage. Eventually he owned his own station in St. Louis City on North Broadway. Owning his own station put him in close contact with people in the oil business. The story goes that he soon left his station and became a "wildcatter". Wildcat is defined in the dictionary as "an oil well drilled in an area not previously known to have oil". So he was a person that would study the geology of land to determine if there was the possibility of oil under the surface and then proceed to drill in those areas. Sometimes they found oil, other times they did not.

I was born in Albany Kentucky. Their home in Albany is where my first memories of my grandfather start. Although I was born there, we did not live there. We called St. Louis home. Summers in Albany were always different but in a good way. There were the summers they took us to Gatlinburg TN, summers spent at the local country club swimming our days away, or just playing around in the backyard. There was always something to do. I loved the house in Albany. My father told me it originally was a small cabin and that he and my grandfather slowly added on the remainder of the house. It had a central corridor with an east and west wing, what today would be called a rambling ranch. And sidewalks, there were plenty of sidewalks plus porches at every door. That was another summer activity I participated in, though not voluntarily. Each summer my sister and I were given the "privilege" of painting all the sidewalks and

porches a bright red. I hated the job, especially as I got older, but in the end it was always worth it because our reward for doing it was our pick of activity before it was time to go home.

My mother's parents divorced before I was born, both remarrying. My step-grandmother (which I called grandma Ethel) was not a cook. My grandfather used to joke that the only time she actually cooked breakfast was when we were there. I remember waking up every morning to the aroma of breakfast cooking. I would wander into the kitchen and grandpa would be sitting in his recliner in the kitchen working a crossword puzzle watching grandma cook.

They settled in Albany because of oil. I have located records to show that they explored different places, from Oklahoma to Ohio but found their biggest "wells" in Kentucky. After World War II, my parents lived in Albany with them. My father worked in the oil fields with my grandfather. This was all before I was born. Sometime in the 1950's my parents moved back to St. Louis.

The kitchen was the heart of their home. Everything happened there. I remember when I was little my grandfather used to tease me. He had lost a thumb and part of his index finger in an accident many years ago on an oil field. He used to tell me if I didn't do what I was told by my parents that I would loose my fingers too, because that was what happened to him! When he started listening, his fingers quit falling off!

In the early 1970's my grandparents sold the house in Albany. I cried and still get sad thinking about it today. But, they had "bigger and better" things going on in Tennessee. Wildcatting in Oneida and living in the local motel was taking a lot out of them so they decided it was best to permanently move there.

For a child, the summers in Oneida were ok but nothing could beat Albany. My grandfather was one of three men who discovered the "West Oneida" fields, which I believe are still working to this day. He set up an office just outside Oneida and was a very prominent man in this city.

Still thinking of him, I arrived home to find my mother a mess. We packed quickly and headed out to Oneida. Driving was the only option because there were no airports close to Oneida. The drive took 13 hours. It was a very long trip.

Since the death of my grandmother Ethel in 2000, I have inherited all the family records, which are newspaper articles, ledgers, pictures and mineral deeds.

Here are some newspaper/newsletter articles on my grandfather, giving more details than I knew being his granddaughter. I have also included some photographs, starting with his service in the Navy during WW1 to wildcatting in Kentucky and Tennessee.

Story from the **“Independent Herald, Oneida TN, February 8, 1978”**

Prominent Scott oil man dies Tuesday

A prominent Scott County oil producer died suddenly Tuesday just minutes after he was involved in a minor two-car collision on Coopertown Road west of Oneida.

DEAD is Ervin (sp) J. Vawter, 80, a resident of Oneida and one of three men credited with opening up one the richest oil fields in the state.

Vawter was reportedly involved in an accident with a vehicle driven by Roscoe Mays, 40, but Trooper Eddie Pierce of the Tennessee Highway Patrol said Vawter’s death did not appear to be a direct result of the accident.

Trooper Pierce said that Vawter walked away from the wreck and into the home of Clayton Newport, apparently to summon police to the accident. “He apparently fell dead when he got inside the Newport home,” said Pierce, who added that an autopsy had been ordered in the case.

According to Trooper Pierce’s accident report, Vawter was driving a 1977 Chrysler, while Mays was driving a 1972 Chevrolet. Vawter was reportedly traveling westbound and attempting to turn off Coopertown road and into the Newport driveway when the collision occurred.

May’s car which was eastbound at the time of the collision, apparently sideswiped the front of Vawter’s car before careening off the road and crashing head-on into a tree in the Newport yard, according to Trooper Pierce.

Vawter reportedly sustained a minor cut to his hand, but shortly after the accident complained of pain in his left arm. He was transported by ambulance to the Scott County Hospital where he was dead on arrival shortly after noon.

Vawter had been involved in oil drilling and exploration since he was 16 years old (1914). Born in Nowata, Okla. in 1898, Vawter’s first big success in the oil business came in Albany, Ky. in the 1930’s. The Albany-area oil fields are presently some of the most productive in the state and reports are that the first well Vawter drilled in is still producing.

Vawter moved to Scott County in the 1960’s and shortly afterwards he, Bill Cooper and Clayton Newport began oil exploration in what is now known as the West Oneida fields on Coopertown Road some six miles west of Oneida.

Those three men are credited with the discovery of oil and natural gas in that

area of the county when they drilled in the Thompson Heir No. 1 well on May 6, 1969. That was the well that signaled the beginning of widespread oil speculation and investments in Scott County.

Vawter has long been active in civic and community affairs in Oneida as a member of the Board of Directors of the Scott County Chamber of Commerce. He was one of the few men honored with an honorary lifetime director's post with the Chamber.

In addition, Vawter was a charter member and director of the Tennessee Oil and Gas Association.

His body was taken to West, Collins & Murley Funeral Home in Oneida where funeral arrangements were incomplete at press time.

“Resolution passed by the Tennessee Oil & Gas Association”:

TOGA

A Resolution

Be it resolved that the Tennessee Oil & Gas Association Board of Directors, Representing all members and guests gathered this 26th day of May, 1978 in Gatlinburg, do express their sadness at the passing of Irvin J. Vawter.

WHEREAS, Irvin J. Vawter was a beloved member of the Association and recognized as the Father of the Tennessee Oil Business;

WHEREAS, Irvin J. Vawter was a true friend, an astute businessman and a dedicated oil man;

WHEREAS, although Irvin J. Vawter is no longer with us, he will not be forgotten, but remembered always as the great man he was.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that we express to his wife and family we share their grief and thank them for sharing him with us during his life on earth.

*Respectfully submitted,
TENNESSEE OIL & GAS
ASSOCIATION
Norman Acres
Treasurer*

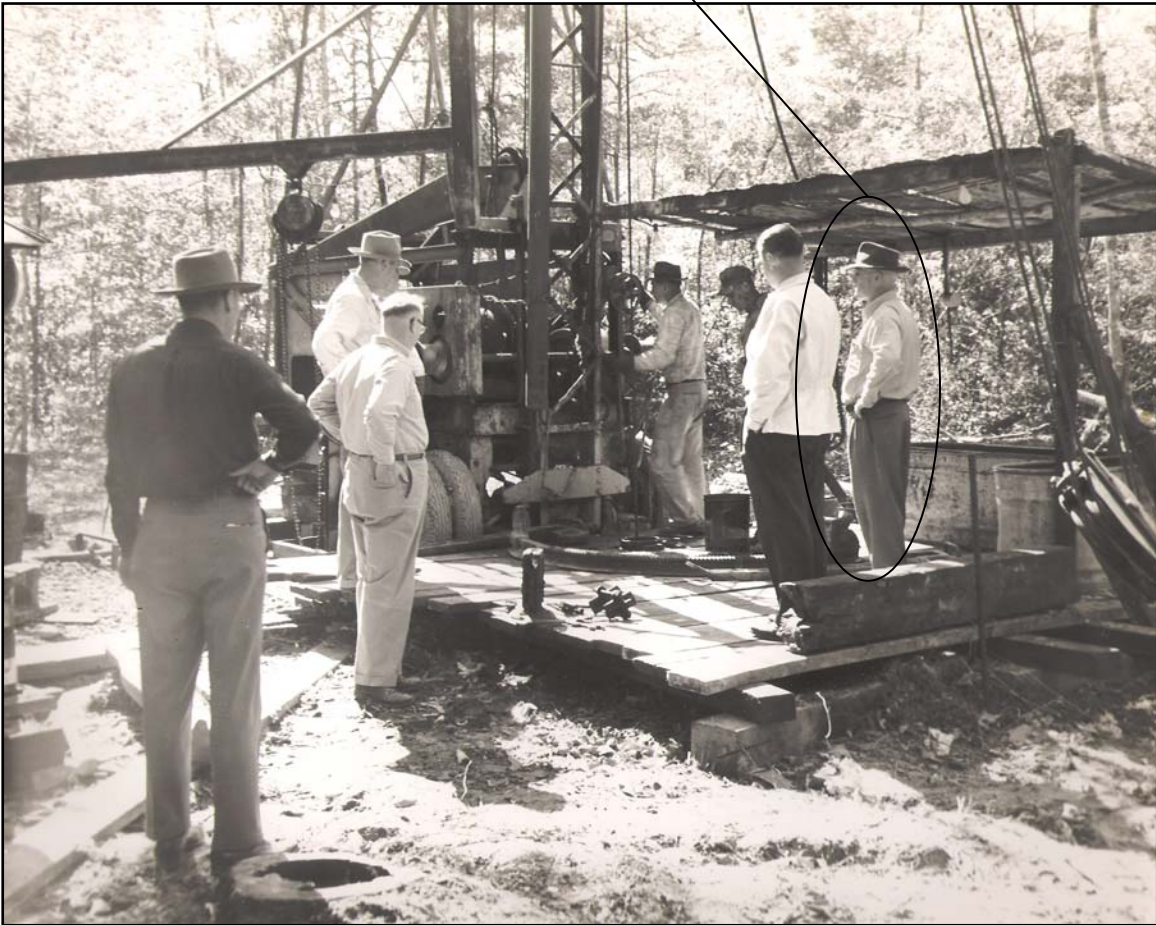


Irvin J. Vawter
Navy WWI



Irvin J. Vawter & Friend, Navy WWI

Oil Well Drilling Rig, Kentucky. Irvin J. Vawter on right





Top Clockwise: 1. Irvin J. Vawter (middle) with partners at oil well in KY. 2. Irvin J. & Ethel A. Cunningham Vawter, undated photo. 3. Site of an oil drill, Irvin J. Vawter on left, Harry T. Collins (my father) 2nd on left. 4. Irvin J. Vawter & Gwendolyn L. Vawter Collins (my mother, his daughter) at 80th birthday celebration, one month before Irvin's death.



Following are some additional articles on Irvin J. Vawter:

**“The New Era” Newspaper, known as the “Voice of Clinton County”
Albany, Kentucky – Wednesday Morning, November 17, 1948**

*Oil News by S. V. Brents
Vawter’s Anniversary*

This month witnesses the fifth anniversary of Irvin J. Vawter’s advent into Clinton County as an oil operator. It was on Armistice Day, November 11, 1943, that he took his first lease in the county. Three days later, on the 14th, he moved a rig onto the Robert Dickerson lease on Willis Creek, and in seven days more, on the 22nd, he brought in his first well in the county, from the Granville Lime. The Dickerson lease with several producers is still one of his best properties.

Since that time, Mr. Vawter has drilled more than 250 wells in this and adjacent counties, an average of 50 a year and has more than 100 steady oil producers on pump now, making him the largest producer in the county. Vawter is cutting down on his drilling program for the winter and will limit his activities largely to taking care of existing wells until spring. In the meanwhile he is building an attractive and commodious ranch style home for himself in Oak Hill Park in North Albany and we are all hoping he and his splendid family will become permanent fixtures in Albany.

During October and early November Vawter completed 10 new wells, 7 of them producers. He is drilling No. 2 on the Riddls hrs land, now owned by S. D. Jarvis.

(One last article on next page!)

Irvin John Vawter
dob: 1/10/1898 Nowata, Oklahoma
dod: 2/7/1978 Oneida, Tennessee
interned: Albany Cemetery, Albany Kentucky

Mother: Mahala A. Sanders
Father: Everett E. Vawter

Grandmother: Elizabeth Grinstead
Grandfather: John S. Vawter

Great Grandmother: Sarah Parks
Great Grandfather: Jesse R. Vawter

