

The Bowling Green Refining Company: Makers of “Kentucky Maid” Gasoline

Throughout the autumn of 1931, Bowling Green motorists heading from Lost River Cave to the Russellville Pike over then-unpaved Dishman Mill Pike could glimpse the results of local initiative and cooperative enterprise rising over the treetops. The Bowling Green Refining Company had begun construction of the tanks, boilers, smokestacks and distillation equipment that, for the next five years, would produce the region’s own “Kentucky Maid” gasoline.

Oil drilling in southcentral Kentucky, begun in earnest around 1920, had produced “boomlets” of economic activity ever since. By early 1931, however, producers and royalty owners in Warren, Simpson and Allen counties were hurting. National overproduction had caused the Illinois Pipeline Company, supplier to Standard Oil of Kentucky, to close down receipts, and the Indian Refining Company had cut back its purchases from the area because the oil’s high sulphur content made it more costly to process. With a monthly capacity of some 25,000 barrels, the oilmen of the Bowling Green District concluded that establishing a local refinery to create a market for their product would be their “only salvation.”¹

Public reaction was positive. Many service station owners guaranteed support by promising to retail the products of any refiner that purchased local crude. On June 26, 1931, the Bowling Green Refining Company was incorporated to fill that role. Although the company limited its common stockholders to producers and royalty owners willing to deliver oil in payment for stock issued, other community members rallied to participate in the venture. Realizing its economic value to southcentral Kentucky, many of Bowling Green’s well-known citizens including Bert J. Borrone, Otha D. Porter, Marshall Love and Sam Pushin, together with businesses such as the Coca-Cola Bottling Works, Deemer Floral Company and the Eugene Gerard Company joined with ninety other individuals and firms to invest in preferred stock.²

Construction of the refinery began in mid-August 1931 on forty acres of land between Russellville Pike and the L&N Railroad. When operations commenced on November 17, however, the company was still without a brand name for its gasoline. After the proposed name “Cardinal” encountered trademark problems, the refinery staged a contest and awarded a prize of twenty-five dollars to Bowling Green resident Mrs. Nixon Pickard for suggesting “Kentucky Maid.” The company added its own slogan, “Smiles at Miles.”³

The Park City Daily News celebrated the Bowling Green Refining Company’s rescue of the local oil industry in a special section of its December 29, 1931 issue. Photographs showed a necessarily sprawling and ugly plant, but reporters enthusiastically described its modern equipment, stark functionalism and even its rather hazardous atmosphere. Crude oil arrived through a pipe running 2-1/2 miles from the Illinois Pipeline Company’s pumping station on Morgantown Road. Above-ground storage tanks held more than 9,000 barrels to supply the refinery’s capacity of 1,500 barrels per day. Two ponds collected up to 5,000 barrels of water from six wells. A sixty-foot “fractioning tower” used steam and gravity to separate oil, heated in a barn-sized pipe still, into gasoline and heavier byproducts such as kerosene and fuel oil. Finally, two silo-shaped agitator tanks treated the gasoline to remove impurities and make it “sweet.”⁴

While no one expected a return to the good times of the previous decade—oil prices, in fact, slid from eighty-five cents a barrel in 1931 to sixty cents in 1933—the refinery’s operations nevertheless transformed the landscape in and around Bowling Green. Oil fields returned to life. Truckers took to the road, hauling gasoline to retailers. New service stations opened to accompany the eleven in Warren County and fifteen in Allen and Simpson Counties selling Kentucky Maid gasoline. Company president Worth Dafoe reported that eighteen months after opening, the refinery was accepting crude from 2,700 wells in all three counties and generating royalty checks for more than 300 farmers. The “ripple effect” of the company’s activities—railroad freight fees, tax payments and employment in ancillary businesses—returned an estimated \$350,000 to the economy in 1933 and \$600,000 in 1934, making oil refining as important to the region as tobacco.⁵

The refinery’s owners, however, knew from experience that success could be short-lived, for their always-unstable business was becoming increasingly competitive. Despite the Depression, Americans’ continuing love for their cars had prompted improvements in automotive technology that required higher-octane gasoline and correspondingly more sophisticated production techniques. The refinery’s relatively small capacity, its research and development costs, and its acknowledged dependence on “public sentiment and direct interest” in the face of its competitors’ national marketing strategies hampered efforts to expand its base of distribution.⁶

Ultimately, dwindling supply sealed the company’s fate. Oil producers began to bypass the refinery when pipeline companies offered better prices. For several months in late 1935, as much as one third of its necessary crude had to be brought in from Owensboro fields. Finally, in February 1936, stockholders met at the Helm Hotel and voted to liquidate the Bowling Green Refining Company because it was no longer able to obtain enough local oil to operate at a profit.⁷

The refinery completed its outstanding contracts, then shut down for good on April 26, 1936. (Although thirty men lost their jobs, no environmentally conscious citizen today could mourn the end of the company’s fifteen-year lease to discharge its waste into “Buzzard’s Cave” north of Dishman Lane.) Warren County was no longer a viable site for gasoline production, but like most American communities it remained an enthusiastic consumer. For the next decade, the Ohio Oil Company used the old refinery site as a distribution center for its own brand of “Linco” gasoline and motor oil. Meanwhile, the equipment of the Bowling Green Refining Company was sold to a county man who contemplated moving it to—of all places—Texas.⁸

¹ *Park City Daily News*, 3, 4 March 1931.

² *Courier-Journal*, 10 March 1931; Warren County (Ky.) Articles of Incorporation Book 3, p. 56; *Park City Daily News*, 29 December 1931.

³ Warren County (Ky.) Deed Book 169, p. 66; *Park City Daily News*, 8, 18, 29 December 1931.

⁴ *Park City Daily News*, 6 August, 18 September, 1 October, 29 December 1931.

⁵ *Park City Daily News*, 17 November 1932, 10 May 1933, 30 October 1934.

⁶ *Park City Daily News*, 30 October 1934.

⁷ *Park City Daily News*, 11 February 1936; (Bowling Green) *Times-Journal*, 11 February 1936.

⁸ *Park City Daily News*, 26 April 1936; Warren County (Ky.) Articles of Dissolution Book 3, p. 322; Warren County (Ky.) Deed Book 175, p. 201.