

2008: RANDOLPH RUST (1854–1930)

July 2, 1902 is a landmark in the unfolding story of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, for on that historic morning as the sun broke onto a clearing in the dense Guayaguayare forest, oil was struck!

It was a heroic deed in any respect. Roads were non-existent for miles and miles around. Rough passageways that were alternatively hard and dusty in the dry season, and quagmires of mud and ooze when the wet weather arrived, served to link the immediate areas. Contact with the outside world was by track or by boat. Hordes of mosquitoes and sandflies, and the incidents of malaria, made life was extremely difficult for the wildcatters. The drilling equipment was primitive and had to be brought in by boat after seemingly interminable delays. Yet despite these enormous odds and lack of seismic tests, one man stands out as the pioneer of an industry that is today our lifeblood. Undeterred and undaunted by many who sought to dissuade him or even ridicule him, he pressed on, ever determined, ever optimistic, convinced that the traces of oil oozing to the surface in certain parts of south-east Trinidad, were surefire indications of rich oil supplies.

We are talking about Randolph Rust who spared no effort and expense in reaching his dream of a great new industry for Trinidad and Tobago. Many came after him and drilled in other areas and helped harness his dream, but it was Rust who took the lead and pioneered the industry that is today the bedrock of our economy.

Randolph Thomas Hammond Rust was born in London on July 24, 1854. The eldest of seven children, he was the son of Dr. Thomas Parker Rust and his wife Martha née Randolph. He received his early education at a boarding school in Hampshire and at the City of London School but without any special scholastic success, being a doer rather than a thinker. After training in business in London, and a stint with the

Royal Naval Artillery Volunteers, then commanded by Lord Brassey, he worked with a bank in Norwich and married his first cousin Jean Allen who died a few years later. In 1881 he was then transferred to the Trinidad firm of Campbell Hannays - the forerunners of Gordon Grant and Company. But being a man of very bold and adventurous disposition, he was soon off to British Guiana journeying up the Mazaruni and Essequibo rivers in search of gold. Unfortunately, he contracted blackwater fever in the jungle while opening up the goldfields and returned to Trinidad.

In 1881, he met an American by the name of Henry Trowbridge, with whom he engaged in business and together they opened the firm, Rust Trowbridge and Company on Almond Walk which were general commission agents, merchants, insurance and shipping agents, importers and exporters and wholesale dealers in provisions. Five years later, on a trip to England, he married a Scottish-Canadian lady by the name of Catherine Rose MacDonald who became his guiding light and shared in all his future undertakings.

Randolph Rust's interest in oil was sparked off by the development of the industry in the United States, by the sense of adventure it tingled in his young mind. As a true pioneer, he foresaw oil rising to the highest prominence as a source of energy in the world of the future. He was also encouraged by the early explorations of Walter Darwent, who in 1866 drilled the first well on the Aripere estate in Oropouche. Mr. Darwent died two years later.

In 1895, Rust got wind of oil seepages at Aripere and in the forest at Guayaguayare. Investigations discovered that at Aripere there was a pipe sticking up just from the surface of the earth with a dark green liquid pulsating up and down. This was the old well of Walter Darwent come to life, oozing oil onto the forest floor. And in Guayaguayare after a difficult journey from Port of Spain by train, horseback and

corial paddling up the Pilote river, he discovered to his amazement, the astonishing sight of 25 acres of land comprising puddles of asphalt and pools of petroleum. These amazing discoveries for Rust were the start of an interest which would become a complete obsession.

At that time, Rust met John Lee Lum who owned the adjoining property at Guayaguayare, and the two soon decided to join forces for oil exploration. They acquired the Aripere estate, and obtained a concession over some 50 square miles at Mayaro/Guayaguayare.

Rust commenced his oil operations at the Aripere estate. The bush was cleared and a lot of the old equipment from the Darwent well was recovered and found usable. It was almost impossible to interest anyone in Trinidad in the oil prospect and the early efforts were financed entirely by Lee Lum and himself. After five unproductive, heart-breaking years, Rust finally found financial support in Canada with the firm Hiram Walker and Sons of Walkerville, Ontario as a result of which the Oil Exploration Company of Canada was started. Operations commenced at Guayaguayare on May 30th 1902, the first well drilled and oil struck one month later on July 2nd. This was a great triumph for Rust, and he took advantage of the occasion to invite a number of distinguished visitors to the site, including Governor, Sir Alfred Moloney. But after 300 barrels were produced, the well was closed, because no shipping company would carry the light, low flash-point oil which was a worldwide problem at the time.

Over the next few years, a total of twenty wells were drilled in the area, with a varying degree of success, but eventually all operations ceased due to many factors, viz:- finance, inaccessibility of terrain, and non-existence of a proper geological guide.

But Rust himself refused to be daunted by an apparently never-ending series of reverses. He had fallen deeply in love with Trinidad, his adopted home and served it long and faithfully as oil pioneer, businessman, Councillor, Mayor of its capital city, founder of the Scout movement, and commissioned officer of the Trinidad Light Infantry Volunteers, which he commanded for the duration of the First World War – all in the space of 48 busy and not entirely unrewarding years.

Throughout that half century, he never lost faith in the country's oil prospects and managed to infect a few with his enthusiasm, although to the majority he was rather an object of local amusement. He and Lee Lum had pledged and lost their all in their great efforts to prove their point. At first, they had secured Canadian backing, then, when that was withdrawn, aid was found from financial sources in London. But they and their supporters were never able to make a viable oil field out of their baffling Guayaguayare concessions.

In one of his last public lectures still aimed at drawing attention to *“the future possibilities of what by now could fairly be called Trinidad's latest, but by no means least, industry – petroleum and its products”* Rust sadly, but proudly proclaimed *“For years the pioneers of this new industry have fought an uphill battle in the face of much discouragement and many difficulties, but our faith has never failed.”*

On a business trip to England in 1930, he died and is buried in the West Norwood Cemetery, London.

Today, 78 years after his death that unfaltering faith has finally been vindicated.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mr. Randolph Rust (posthumously) into the Business Hall of Fame on this 11th November, 2008.