

## Cottage Grove's Oil Well... or the Story of Oily Olsen

Adapted from article by Alice Christianson



Cottage Grove once had its very own oil well. The structure was a famous landmark in the 1920's at the top of what is now called Mt. David.

The 1920's was a time in America of many "get rich quick" **schemes** and other fake **investments**. One such "opportunity" arrived in Cottage Grove early in the 1920's in the form of a sure-fire plan from a man of the cloth, a religious leader.

Reverend David Olsen came to Cottage Grove in early 1923. He announced his arrival with a small news article in the local paper saying that he'd arrived in Cottage Grove after being highly successful in the oil business in Half Moon Bay, California. A few weeks later, Olsen printed another announcement, inviting townspeople to an important meeting where they were to be told how they all could become rich. The following is a news account from the Oregonian at the time. It describes what happened at that meeting.

*Cottage Grove can have an oil gusher within a few months, a hundred or more of them within a year and work on the first one will start within thirty days from the time the people of Cottage Grove offer reasonable cooperation. This was the statement made at a mass meeting Tuesday night by Rev. David Olsen of California, formerly pastor there, secretary of a national Americanization movement and oil promoter. The meeting was arranged by local citizens and was the oddest promotion meeting ever held here.*

*The Rev. Mr. Olsen devoted the first part of his address to a sermonette and during the progress of his talk digressed to speak upon moral issues. He and his associates offered to guarantee that oil in paying quantities would be found and in the event of failure the money paid by local people would be returned to them.*

*Mr. Olsen had on the platform with him four weird machines of his own invention, by the use of which he claimed to be able to detect the presence of oil within one mile and to measure with accuracy the depth of each oil stratum. He said that many years of time and hundreds of thousands of dollars had been expended in their production and that, in thousands of trials they had never yet made an error.*

*One, having somewhat the appearance of a "waterwitch," indicates the presence of oil underneath the spot over which the machine passes, he said. Another, having something of the appearance of a gander's neck, points the direction of oil anywhere within a mile. It was asserted that these machines would never make a*



*mistake even when used in an automobile traveling at 40 miles per hour.” The oil derrick was completed and ready to drill in November of 1923. (The Oregonian, April 19, 1923)*

Time would pass and the Reverend Olsen would continue to ask citizens for more money to drill even deeper to get to the promised oil. The public’s patience wore as thin as their bank accounts by the end of the year. One investor, Mr. Woodard traveled to Half Moon Bay, California to investigate Rev. Olsen’s claims or a thriving oil business there. He found no oil wells. That was the last straw. Fearing **reprisals**, the Reverend Olsen slipped **stealthily** out of town with folk’s money and never returned. He was jailed several years later in Canada for attempting a similar oil well scheme. He has since been known in Cottage Grove’s history as, “Oily Olsen”, the rascal who stiffed the folks of Cottage Grove all those years ago.



Left: November 9, 1923, Cottage Grove businessmen and other investors wait for the dedication ceremony to begin at the town’s first and only oil well on Mt. David.



Right: November 9, 1923, another picture of the oil well dedication on Mt. David. Reverend David Olsen, in a long frock coat, promises the crowd that Cottage Grove will have a bounty of black gold “within a few months.”

#### Discussion Points

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1. What did Reverend Olsen claim to have done in Half Moon Bay, California?
  2. Why do you think the citizens of Cottage Grove were willing to invest with a stranger?
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#### Vocabulary

**Investments:** providing money to a person or project with the expectation of profit at a future date

**Reprisals:** an act of retaliation or revenge

**Scheme:** make plans, especially in a devious way or with intent to do something illegal or wrong

**Stealthy:** behaving, done, or made in a cautious and secretive manner, so as not to be seen or heard

