

RAMBLINGS ON EARLY OIL HISTORY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL H. GIDDENS
ON IDA TARBELL

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and
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PAUL H. GIDDENS was a young history professor at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, when he first met the famous writer, Ida M. Tarbell. At that time, Tarbell was seventy-seven years old and nearing the end of her career as one of America's pioneer women journalists. By then, her major works included *Madame Roland: A Biographical Study*, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, a series on Louis Pasteur for *McClure's Magazine*, and the book that first earned her the title of "muckraker" — *The History of the Standard Oil Company*.

In 1938, Paul Giddens published his first major book, *The Birth of the Oil Industry*, which he had written in collaboration with Tarbell. From their first meeting in Meadville in 1934 until her death in 1944, Tarbell and Giddens remained fast friends. In many respects, Paul Giddens took up Tarbell's mantle in his continued interest in making public the history of oil in northwestern Pennsylvania and the United States. Since 1938 he has written extensively on the subject and was one of the prime movers in developing and maintaining the Drake Well Museum's collection in Titusville. His major works include *The Birth of the Oil Industry*, *Early Days of Oil: A Pictorial History of the Beginnings of the Industry in Pennsylvania*, *The Beginnings of the Petroleum Industry: Sources and Bibliography*, *Pennsylvania Petroleum, 1750-1872*, *The History of the Standard Oil Company (Indiana)*, and hundreds of journal articles and other publications on early oil history.

After teaching history and political science at Allegheny College

This interview was conducted as part of the Titusville Community History Project, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Professor Zavacky teaches political science at the Titusville Campus of the University of Pittsburgh. He received a B.A. from Clarion University, an M.A. from the Pennsylvania State University, and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Pittsburgh. A graduate of Allegheny College, Professor Woolever received her M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Pittsburgh. She is currently on leave from her position at the University of Michigan at Dearborn to head the Titusville Community History Project.—
Editor

for many years, Paul Giddens went on to become the president of Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Now retired and once again living in Meadville, he granted this interview in February 1982. In it, Giddens tells the story of those early days with Ida Tarbell and the retrieval of oil history in Pennsylvania.

Q. Dr. Giddens, how did you first meet Ida Tarbell and get involved in the study of oil history?

A. It was by sheer and strange coincidence. It goes back to 1934 when Ida Tarbell was a trustee at Allegheny College where I taught history. At that time, John Scheide, Jim Caldwell, and Joe Bloss [influential men from Titusville] approached Ida Tarbell to do a history of oil for the seventy-fifth jubilee of the discovery of oil. They wanted her to do it because she was from that early oil area, and she had already written *The History of the Standard Oil Company*.

She replied, "I've got more than I can do now. Why don't you get that young fellow over at Allegheny interested in it?"

So they went to Dr. Tolley, the president of the college, and asked him to get me to do it. I was just a little whippersnapper then — thirty-one years old — I'm now seventy-nine. The first thing I did was to go to Titusville to talk to Miss Tarbell about the project. Miss Tarbell, my wife Marie, and I went down to the Drake Well Museum and walked around. It was a little brick building then. By 1942 there was talk of building a new structure. I was the curator of the museum then.

Charlie Stotz was the architect. He and I went to look at the Field Museum in Chicago to see what they had done. Then Charlie came back to Titusville and drew plans for the building.

First, I had to go to the state legislature to get the half-million dollars in appropriation. So I went to Harrisburg to see Ray Smock, who was the Secretary of Highways and from Titusville. I asked him to get an appointment for me with the governor and we got the appointment.

I knew the money was there, but the governor had to release the money to build the museum. I forget his name; check it out. [Governor Arthur H. James] There were several times during this whole procedure that I felt if someone had opened a trapdoor and let me fall through I'd be more comfortable. But I stuck with it and I got the money. The governor pressed the button.

I had some connections before that incident because I had a

meeting earlier with John Scheide, Jim Caldwell, and Joe Bloss on what was to be done to the museum. I was to write the report on what was to be done to make the museum more flourishing. I don't know if a copy of the report exists yet.

Then they wanted me to implement that thing. And that's how I got to be curator of the museum for eleven years, from 1942 to 1953.

But back to Ida Tarbell and our walk about that old museum in 1934. It took a great deal of persuasion for me to write *The Birth of the Oil Industry*. I had written my thesis at Iowa, the doctoral dissertation on colonial Maryland. I would have died for colonial Maryland then; I loved it. But to give up Maryland for oil and such uncertainty. . . . But I've thrived on it ever since.

Q. How did you find Ida Tarbell as a person?

A. Ida Tarbell? A very gracious woman. For my book, *Birth of the Oil Industry*, I would write a chapter and I'd send it to her and she wrote back with her comments. She was very frank, through the summers of 1938 and 1939 when the book came out.

Before publishing the book, they had a big dinner at the high school [Titusville] for Miss Tarbell. President Tolley came to it — a grand occasion. She came to the affair. [She] was raised in Rouseville, near here; born in Wattsburg, Erie County. Her father moved to Rouseville to build tanks for the oil people, and she grew up down there. So she knew everything — burning fires, refineries, and all of that. And then of course the South Improvement Company, the forerunner of Standard Oil. She went through that too. She knew exactly how the independents felt about Standard Oil. Her father was involved on that. She picked it up listening to her father and mother speak. She was raised with the oil industry.

One day in the National Arts Club we were having lunch. I had waited for this moment for many months. I asked her if she were doing this over again, what would she change. I can see her now. She put her knife and fork down and she straightened up as she would — and could. She said: "I wouldn't change a comma."

That's the way she was. She wrote the book on Standard Oil and one on Lincoln. And don't forget the French book on Madame Roland.

Q. She's often described as the "Pioneer Female Journalist."

A. She was that in a real sense. She gave up her job writing for the *Chautauquan* and went to Paris. She had no money and no resources except the ability to write. She wrote for the *Cincinnati Star Times*

and for the Pittsburgh paper and one in Chicago. The pay was \$5.50 to \$6.50 then.

One day [S. S.] McClure came along — of *McClure's Magazine* — and got her to write for the magazine. She wanted to write some French stories. One of the residents in Titusville was a cleaner and presser from Paris. She got him and his wife to talk to her about Paris before she went there. She was very familiar with it. She wrote one of her first stories about this fellow in Titusville. She wrote it so well that they wanted more. So she went on, and on.

McClure wanted her to do Lincoln, which she did. Well, she did the history of Standard Oil. McClure was not in on that. Ray Stannard Baker and others in that office tried to figure what to do next. They figured that trusts were one of the biggest problems in the U.S. so they had better do that. And who better to do that than Ida Tarbell who had been raised in Rouseville?

McClure had gone to Europe. The vice-president at *McClure's* suggested that she go to Switzerland to talk to McClure. She talked to him and got the OK. She came back and did the *History of Standard Oil*.

Her father didn't want her to do it because he thought it would ruin her. All dire things might come to pass. It did not hurt her.

I've got a paper I'm doing now on what the reviewers said about her work. When I find a publisher for it, I'll send you a copy.

Helen Hilker [a former student of Giddens] worked at the Library of Congress. I wrote her to ask if she could send the reviews to me. That's how I got them. She's in Washington, retired, and living on Massachusetts Avenue.

Here's another interesting story about early oil. In Titusville, there was an R. D. Locke. He and another oilman left Titusville and went to Taiwan and had built the first oil well in Taiwan. They took all their equipment from Titusville. They drilled a well there in 1878 and then came back to Titusville.

I did a story on him in the *Titusville Herald*. Mr. E. T. Stevenson, the present editor's father, also interviewed Mr. Locke. He was one of the oldest living oilmen around here.

I wrote to the Taiwan embassy in Washington, to a Mr. Sampson Kuo and got him interested. I tried to get the story of what was happening in Taiwan. Our government had closed the Taiwan embassy in Washington, and Mr. Kuo was out of a job. So he got his doctorate in history at Georgetown University. He wrote on Locke and the first oil well in Taiwan.

Locke had a diary; it's in the Drake Well Museum now. He made an entry every single day since he came to Titusville.

Q. Has anything been written on him? Other than Kuo's dissertation?

A. As I noted, I wrote several stories on him for the *Titusville Herald*, but nothing very serious until Kuo lost his job at the embassy. He's completed his Ph.D. thesis and sent me a copy. And the story is all there.

One summer I xeroxed the material I could on oil in Taiwan and I sent it to Kuo. That's when I found out where the diary was, the Locke diary. His daughter-in-law had it; she lived in Haverford, Pennsylvania. I convinced her to put it in the Drake Well Museum.

Kuo's thesis is based, to a large extent, on Locke's diary. Kuo had the facility to do it. He could go into the Library of Congress and pull out the Chinese documents. He got things I couldn't spend my time doing. I have his address.

I've spent many years now writing about oil. Our son Tom is vice-president for development at Rockford College in Illinois. While rummaging around, he found a Spellman Press who was a Rockefeller. He xeroxed a copy of my article on Standard Oil of Indiana, and sent it to this guy. He wrote back to say that in a retirement home in California is the widow of Allan Nevins, whom I referred to in my articles. He befriended me so many times that I never had an opportunity to thank him. But I was glad to be able to thank his widow.

Q. How can one do as much as you have done? You're an amazing man.

A. The article I wrote about Standard Oil of Indiana (1980) was the two-hundredth article I wrote since 1958.

Q. What happened to your original interest in colonial Maryland?

A. Colonial Maryland? I forgot about that but I really loved the subject. As a graduate student I came from Iowa to Baltimore and then to Annapolis to find material on the colonial times. I published on this.

When I first came to graduate school, I decided that I would write any term paper so that I could publish it. There were about five or six publishings of papers that I did for class.

I remember one article about Forbes's expedition against Duquesne. There's another I did. Miss [Edith] Rowley got some papers from Ben Pittman. She was acquainted with some of his relatives in Cincinnati. He was the shorthand guy that took down notes on Lincoln's trial. Miss Rowley got the notes and I published the article.

Q. What is there left to be done by you?

A. I corresponded with Bennett Law at the University of Georgia. He is now writing the history of Exxon, and we swap stories back and forth. He aroused my curiosity.

Also, I went to the west coast of South America, to Peru, in 1941. I got to Lima and went to see the manager of International Petroleum Company [Standard New Jersey subsidiary], a Mr. Iddings. We talked. I ate lunch with him every day for the two weeks I was there.

One day he invited me down to his home; "Merenko [*sic*] by the Sea" was his place. After lunch, he took me to a large room just crowded with material. He said: "Now look over this. If there's anything here you want, just take it, because they'll take it out and burn it when I'm gone."

So, I brought home as much material as I could on Talara, the field they opened up in Peru, a big field, and they sold out in 1914 to Imperial Oil. Their office is in Coral Gables. It was quite an experience.

But I'm not fully well. Two years ago when my son was here with me — in Scranton, my doctor told me I had an illness. It left my voice gravelly, as you can hear.

Q. Do you ever get to Titusville?

A. I go to Titusville at a drop of a hat, to Rotary Club, or wherever. I have fond memories there. One time, in 1934, I was going to do the book for Miss Tarbell we've talked about. My wife and I took rooms over in Titusville. I was the first and only man that I know of to live on the second floor of the YWCA. That's quite a distinction, isn't it?

I remember a Miss [Rosa] Bennett, who ran a book store and gift shop and lived across from John Scheide's place. A book salesman came to her before my book was coming out and he tried to get her to order more than several copies. She ordered only a half-dozen copies. Then when the book came out, and the lightning struck, she was badly disappointed.

Q. What was John Scheide like?

A. His library is now at Princeton. Is Mina Ruese still in charge of it? John was a very precise guy, very careful in personal appearance. It's a story I wanted to write one of these days; I'll never get it done, though. But I've got the material.

And I don't think the people in Titusville realize what a library he had. He began the collection with the Gutenberg Bible. I saw all the material. Mina Ruese was there when I was there.

Q. Whatever happened to Caldwell?

A. Jim Caldwell bought a house adjacent to Scheide's. Another of the old families was Miss Grumbine. I wrote a story about her. She taught school in Titusville quite a while. She and Miss Tarbell would read French together, were good friends. Of course, I didn't know Miss Grumbine until she was up in years.

Some of these people ought to be written up, like Joe Bloss, the newspaperman. Someone ought to write a history of the *Herald*. Jim Stevenson may. I remember Bill Stevenson, Jim's brother. I wrote a story about him after his death, for the *Herald*.

Bill Stevenson was nuts on railroads. He would get his mother to drive him up to Corry, and then he would argue with the engineer to let him ride in the locomotive back to Titusville. Another story that's even more prophetic.

Bill went to Dartmouth. While there he enlisted in the Marines and was sent to Guadalcanal. In the early days of Guadalcanal you didn't know if the Marines would be pushed back into the sea. I met E. T. Stevenson (his dad) in the post office then, and he told me an interesting story.

Bill wrote him and asked his dad to send him the New York Central Timetable, so E. T. had sent one. But Bill got his dander up over it. He wrote back that it wasn't a late schedule: "Get me a later one and mail it to me." His dad did. What difference did it make in the Guadalcanal? I don't know. . . .

Q. Thank you for the interview, Dr. Giddens.