

The Jazz Cat Oil Well Gamble

WANTED

By the Mayor of San Diego
750 Live People with One Hundred Dollars
Each to Go After Oil or Anything in
San Diego County or Anywhere
JAZZ-CAT GAMBLE CLOSING

In December 1919, full-page advertisements began running in San Diego and Los Angeles newspapers soliciting dollars for an audacious plan to explore for oil in San Diego. Remarkably, the instigator of the proposal was the city's mayor, Louis J. Wilde. The scheme would attract thousands of dollars from hundreds of San Diegans, all anxious to follow their mayor in the "Jazz Cat Gamble."

Born in Iowa in 1865, Louis Wilde had come to California at age eighteen. Working as an elevator boy in a Los Angeles office building and a clerk in a bakery, he saved enough money to buy real estate during the Southern California "Boom of the 80s." When the boom faded, Wilde moved St. Paul, Minnesota, where he bought and sold farm land and became a banker. He also speculated in Texas oil fields and made a small fortune.

As a wealthy banker and businessman, Wilde came to San Diego in 1903 and launched the most remarkable business and political career the city had ever seen. In the next few years he would organize several banks, finance the local telephone company, build the city's first modern apartment building, and construct the lavish Pickwick Theatre on 4th Street.



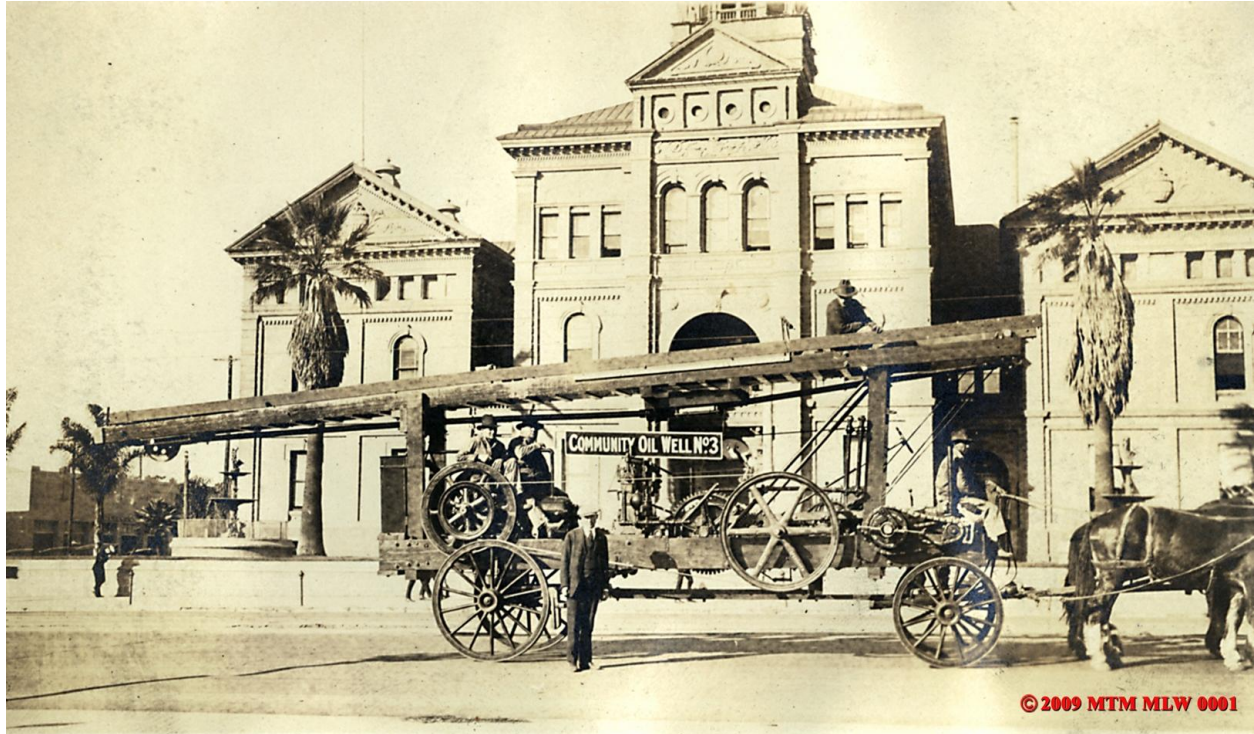
Louis J. Wilde (from William Smythe, *History of San Diego* (1908).

Achievements that endured included donation of a spectacular fountain for Horton Plaza and funding to complete the building of the U.S. Grant Hotel. Less altruistic was his successful lobbying to change the name of D Street to Broadway—the better to enhance the prestige of his home address at 24th and D.

But "the man who made Broadway" carried a few blemishes on his resume that San Diegans chose to ignore. In 1910, an investment venture in the Oregon Trust and Savings Bank of Portland ended badly. When the bank failed State prosecutors alleged Wilde had embezzled funds from depositors. A Portland jury exonerated Wilde two years later.

Wilde turned to politics in 1917 and ran against department store owner George W. Marston for the office of mayor. In the "Smokestacks vs. Geraniums" campaign Wilde promoted Los Angeles-style industrial development and cast his opponent as an anti-development "Geranium George." As a campaign gimmick Wilde pulled a smoldering smokestack through city streets on a truck. With the support of labor and business, the flamboyant Wilde defeated Marston.

In July 1919, the restive promoter instincts of Wilde prompted a curious business venture. The former oil man decided San Diego was the perfect setting for oil exploration and began inviting San Diegans to buy ownership in a “Community Oil Company” for \$100 per share. The mayor was frank with his advertising and stated clearly that the drilling venture was a long shot, “jazz-cat gamble.” But Wilde also reminded his potential subscribers: “your \$100 gamble could be worth upwards to \$20,000.”



Mayor Louis Wilde (sitting in back of rig) and his portable oil drilling rig. *Courtesy of the Motor Transport Museum, Campo, CA.*

The “gamblers” flocked to place their bets. “Thousands of people responded,” recalled Shelley Higgins, assistant city attorney at the time. “All day a steady stream of subscribers found their way to the mayor’s office on the third floor and cheerfully contributed . . . Some people who were down to their last \$10 dollars came in, said so, and gave it up for the use of their mayor in a gamble which they hoped would lift them from want to wealth.”

By February 1920, the mayor’s oil rigs were drilling on Otay Mesa, on the border near Tijuana, near the coastline on Mission Bay, and as far east as Moreno. The mayor’s enthusiasm was infectious. Investors from Los Angeles joined in the hunt with the incorporation of the Linda Vista Oil Company. Mildred Harris Chaplin, wife of the screen comedian, broke a bottle of champagne on the company’s first oil derrick in San Clemente Canyon.

But before long, the snickering began. None of the wells were finding oil. The San Diego *Sun* began publishing daily updates on Wilde’s efforts. “Reports that oil had been struck south of city hall were wildly investigated by a reporter,” the *Sun* announced. “He discovered that a seepage of oil from the mayor’s twin-eight Rolls Rapid had caused the report, the machine having been parked there overnight.”

The *Sun* stepped up the sarcasm on March 1 by publishing a letter from “a northern city” where Wilde was “only too well known.” According to the letter, San Diego’s northern neighbors—presumably Los Angeles—had been surprised at Wilde’s election as mayor and “dumbfounded” by his re-election. “It is a shame that your lovely city must be the goat and suffer such humiliations. You are laughed at, but what can you expect with your jazz cat gambles.”

His dignity offended, Mayor Wilde sued the *Sun* for libel and demanded \$100,000 in damages. From the courtroom the mayor declared, “I am proud of our oil company, and I don’t want to see a city project destroyed on the altar of the *Sun* . . . These fellows who are knocking now will in the finish be eating out of the mayor’s hand!”

The *Sun* demanded a look at the books of the Community Oil Company. When the court refused to order an audit they published their own appraisal and found that Wilde had collected over \$120 thousand from subscribers and spent about \$48 thousand. The largest line item was for land and leases on oil prospects in Texas.

The mayor fought back with a letter to his shareholders published in the *San Diego Union*. Appealing to investors who were not “stampeded by the gusts and disgusts of illiterate journalism,” he said he was anxious to weed out the quitters in his oil fund. “I want friends who have some dynamite and stick-to-it-ive-ness and less skim milk.”

But after a few weeks Mayor Wilde quietly dropped his libel suit against the *Sun*. His drillings had all come up empty and his patient investors lost everything in his Community Oil fund, which ended up as dry as the oil wells.

Wilde’s personal reputation would be somewhat rescued by British royalty. On April 7, Edward, the Prince of Wales, arrived by ship for two-day visit to San Diego. Always the skillful promoter, Mayor Wilde escorted the future king on a sightseeing motorcade, an appearance before 25,000 in City Stadium (Balboa Stadium), golf in Coronado, and a grand ball at the Hotel del Coronado.

Months later Louis Wilde left San Diego for Los Angeles, where he renewed his career in real estate. He would die in Los Angeles in 1926 at age 61.

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