

AWAY IT WENT
FARM GROUND SUDDENLY DISAPPEARS INTO PANNING SINKHOLE

BY KAREN LA PIERRE
klapierre@gbtribune.com

ELLINWOOD — Friday morning, April 24, 1959, a hole suddenly yawned to life in the earth and swallowed up everything in its path in a quiet wheat field near Ellinwood.

It was a normal workday on the farm, and Alfred Panning and his son, Larry, saw a large column of dirt suddenly shoot up into the air like “Old Faithful” in the field about 500 yards from Larry’s house.

Larry still remembers that day vividly. The site was around an old oil well and the ground was caving in.

“We were informed that they were going to clean the location,” Larry said. “We thought maybe it was dynamite, but there was no sound or vibration.” The two immediately went to investigate.

“We saw a large hole was beginning to form,” he said. “We were at a loss as to what was going to happen.

“It rocks you back on your heels,” Larry said. “We didn’t know how dangerous it could get.”

“Within two hours, it spread out nearly 150 feet in all directions from the well,” said in the April 26, 1959 edition of the Great Bend Tribune. “And by then, the well was gone — a big oil field tank, a foundation for a pumping unit, a string of surface pipe — all out of sight. The hole at that time had sheer walls dropping 75 feet to water that appeared to be flowing down into the hole’s center.”

Word quickly travelled, and hundreds of people had already gaped at the funnel-shaped hole by the next day.

By the time the sun went down on Saturday, it was like a vacuum cleaner sucked up the dirt, and “the giant hole was already 300 feet in diameter and still inching out in all directions,” said the Tribune story. The news even went around the world, and Panning’s brother, stationed in Germany, saw the story in a military newspaper.

“The cause of the sinkhole is directly related to oil drilling activities in 1938,” said Larry. “When this site was drilled, the oil company owning the lease failed to follow drilling procedures normally used in this area.”

With the ground water available in this part of Kansas, it is necessary to set surface pipe to prevent surface water and groundwater from following the casing in to the lower formations. In 1946, the well was converted to a salt water disposal well into which water from surrounding wells was pumped, forcing it into lower formations, said the original Tribune article.

For some reason, the surface pipe failed and groundwater entered a salt zone some 1,000 feet below, which is approximately 250 feet thick. Following a lawsuit filed by the Pannings, it is surmised by the courts the water dissolved the salt formation, creating a cavern which caused the land above to subside and create the sinkhole.

Pan American, also known as Standard Oil, had been working in the area and had plugged the well permanently, at least they thought they had.

One Pan Am employee who regularly had worked around the well said in 1959, “Kinda gives you a creepy feeling to think about it.” The oil company put a chain link fence around the water so no one would get hurt.

It has grown 100 feet since 1959 and is still growing. The Farm Service Center took elevation shots in 1992, and a survey taken by the same government agency in 2009 shows the land 400 yards away from the edge of the hole has subsided four feet since 1992, according to Panning.

Despite its history, the area is quiet, and wildlife flock to what has become a pond. The Pannings once stocked the water with fish and water fowl, and the birds still inhabit the sinkhole. However, the water is salty and cannot be used for irrigation.

Larry, a photo hobbyist, has hundred of slides, negatives, and is still fascinated with the sinkhole to this day. He leads tours, has been on Hatteberg's People, and gives talks. In addition, he is a photo hobbyist who has hundred of slides and negatives.

Panning will be giving a presentation on this topic at the Kansas Water Congress conference in Great Bend on Aug.4.

The site is located three miles east of the Ellinwood city limits.

Other sinkholes

Sinkholes in the state of Kansas are not uncommon, but in nearby Russell County, I-70 crosses two active sinkholes that were also caused by oil drilling. These sinkholes have slowly and steadily pulled down the driving lanes since construction of the highway in the mid-1960's and are the result of dissolution of a salt bed over 1300 feet below the surface.

Oil drilling activity has allowed fresh water to pass through the salt, dissolving a volume of it and causing the overlying strata to sink. The two areas of interstate have been regraded at significant cost, and efforts were made in 1986 to stop the subsidence at one of the sinkholes, but the lanes continue to drop. Eventually, a nearby bridge will have to be replaced because of the subsidence.