

Prudhoe Bay: Colossal Resource Discovery

By GEORGE E. UTERMOHLE

"ONE OF THE GREATEST mineral resource discoveries in the history of man is the colossal petroleum resource near Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Slope of Alaska."

This statement was not made by a Chamber of Commerce official or a local politician. It was made by W.T. Pecora, Director, U.S. Geological Survey.

WHILE MOST ALASKANS are aware that the finding of oil in commercial quantities along the Arctic Coast is the biggest thing that has hit Alaska since the gold rushes of the early 20th century, very few of us—including the author—are aware of just how big this development really is. Until the discovery of oil at the Eskimo village near Prudhoe Bay, the largest oil field in the United States was the East Texas Field with its potential production of six billion barrels of oil.

AT A PUBLIC hearing held by the State of Alaska in November 1969 the first reliable estimates on the potential of the Prudhoe fields was released by the oil companies that drilled the discovery wells. This information indicated that the earlier 5 to 10 billion barrel estimate of recoverable oil was conservative.

IN OTHER WORDS, the oil companies are as reasonably sure as they can be at this time that the field will produce as much as as 10 billion barrels and possibly more. According to figures published in the reliable "Oil and Gas Journal" this would make Prudhoe the 7th largest oil field in the world.

NO OTHER FIELD in the entire U.S. is nearly so large as Prudhoe, and it is possible that this area may well produce twice as much as its closest Texan rival. It might also be noted that the East Texas field which has been in production for almost a half century is still a giant in the ever booming economy of Texas.

AT THE STATE hearing in Anchorage it was also divulged that the Prudhoe field is estimated to cover as much as 800 square miles, and is thought to have three separate producing areas or zones.

POSSIBLY in the excitement over the Prudhoe discovery a more important aspect of this discovery has been overlooked. Oil has seldom, if ever, been found in a single large field. Geologic experience indicates that oil usually occurs in what might be termed petroliferous provinces or regions.

THE DISCOVERY of a large field has almost always been a forerunner of many other large and small oil fields in the area. Geologic indications of oil accumulation throughout northern parts of Alaska, Canada, and Siberia make the lands surrounding

the Arctic Ocean a most lucrative area for the search for oil.

ALMOST WITHOUT argument, oil men will admit that the

Arctic is second only to the Arabian and North African areas in its potential for producing oil for the coming generation.