

Oil worries elicit gusher at museum

By Jim Carroll

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Rising oil prices have been generating worldwide attention, and that has again put a spotlight on the site where the industry was born, the Drake Well Museum.

It seems when the world's press starts talking about oil, interest in the museum's exhibits, historic photographs and research material goes up faster than the price of a barrel of crude.

"We are seeing more requests from national news organizations in terms of historic images and research," said Barbara Zolli, director of the museum that is built on the site south of Titusville where Col. Edwin Drake drilled the world's first commercial oil well in 1859.

The museum not only has exhibits that show the early history of the oil industry, but it also has extensive research material and photographs of the region's oil boom.

Zolli said the requests for information and images come from news organizations and filmmakers in this country and abroad. Many film crews visit the site for footage.

"MSNBC, National Geographic, the History Channel," Zolli said, recalling recent requests for information or site visits at the well in Venango County, just across the Crawford County line. "A PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) station just finished up yesterday for a documentary they are doing."

The museum is also seeing increasing numbers of international visitors, Zolli said.

International visitors now make up about 5 to 6 percent of the people who visit the museum. That ratio used to be 11 percent, but after 9/11 the volume of international visitors dropped below 3 percent, Zolli said.

Closer to home, the Pennsylvania Tourism Office also is using the recent attention oil and gas prices have received to call attention to Drake Well.

A news release issued by the Tourism Office in late June urges motorists to "Hit the road on one of Pennsylvania's new road trips and discover one of the many unique small towns like Titusville, where Col. Edwin Drake drilled the first oil well in 1859."

"We thought it would be very timely right now," said Tourism Office spokeswoman Carrie Fischer.

"Everyone is talking about oil and the price of gas ... and we wanted to take advantage of that," she said.

The Tourism Office release also promotes nearby attractions like the Oil Creek & Titusville Railroad and the Caboose Motel, as well as regional attractions in Meadville and Erie.

Zolli said using the oil-price controversy to focus on Drake Well is appropriate.

"We think what we have here is important, and that our story is current and relevant," she said.

41,000 to 48,000 people a year visit the museum's grounds, and 15,000 to 20,000 pay to get in the museum.

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