

Postal History of Imperial Oil Atlantic Perspective Synopsis

Objective

This exhibit traces the formation and growth of Imperial Oil during its first 100 years, from 1880 to 1980, emphasizing its development in Atlantic Canada. It does so using Imperial Oil advertising covers, postcards, all-over advertising covers and related postal material.

Exhibit Plan

The story begins in 1857 when James Miller Williams spaded down fourteen feet to dig the first oil well in North America at Oil Springs, ON. Page 2 shows a cover with an Oil Springs cancel and a map showing the location of Oil Springs.

Page 3 shows an early Imperial Oil Company cover, cancelled just a month after Imperial Oil's incorporation in London, ON, on 8 September 1880. Early Imperial Oil Company covers are seldom seen. The bottom cover shows the new location of Imperial Oil after a fire from a lightning strike destroyed the London refinery forcing its move to Petrolia. Petrolia was the center of the new company in the early years.

The advertising on the covers changed over the years. A green barrel was usually used on advertising covers before 1893. Examples of covers from Shatford Bros., Eastern Oil and finally Imperial Oil Company are shown beginning on page 4. Barrels were the allowed method of transporting oil at that time. In early years, only wooden barrels were used, and 85% of the oil business was kerosene.

Shatford Bros. set up the first oil business in Nova Scotia and Joseph Bullock & Sons in New Brunswick. In Sept. 1888, Joseph Bullock & Sons became Eastern Oil Co., and in 1894 Shatford Bros. merged with it. Finally on Feb. 23, 1899 Imperial Oil took over all Eastern Oil assets and the Canadian assets of Standard Oil including the head office in Sarnia.

Page 7 has a cover with a J. Bullock oil merchant handstamp dated 1886, a rare find and an important part of the story as J. Bullock would become Eastern Oil and finally Imperial Oil.

Pages 11 and 12 introduce new symbols on advertising covers, a rail car and a storage tank. In 1893 oil was allowed to be transported by tank car and stored in bulk containers.

Page 13 has some interesting correspondence. Although the Shatford Bros. and J. Bullock were trying to show a united front as Eastern Oil, the correspondence is signed Shatford Bros.

In 1898 Imperial Oil took over Eastern Oil. Page 14 shows two difficult to find Eastern Oil covers modified for Imperial Oil Company Limited.

In 1898 bulk transport by steamship was made legal. The Imperial Oil advertising covers on pages 22 and 23 have great artwork, and are the most attractive so far. They show a new symbol,

the ship “Maverick”, this being the new method of transportation. Later covers with all-over advertising for gasoline and other products are also very attractive and eye catching.

Pages 25-29 show all-over advertising covers that Imperial Oil used to promote their products. Many of these covers are rare to find in good shape. The covers show that in the first quarter of the century Imperial Oil not only supplied oil and kerosene but also sold lamps, stoves, and heaters that used these products. Axle greases and harness oil were also important products.

In the early 1900s Imperial Oil built a series of refineries. The first and second were built in Vancouver and had their own cancel, IOCO, which later became known as Ioco, an abbreviation of Imperial Oil Company.

The refinery built in Nova Scotia used the cancel IMPEROYAL. A postcard shows the refinery that came on stream in 1918. It was dismantled in the 1970s.

In 1915 Imperial Oil formally established offices in St. John’s, Newfoundland.

1907 saw the first Service Station, in Vancouver. Three postcards from the 1930s and 40s show Service Stations of Imperial Three Stars dealers, two from Nova Scotia (page 33) and one from New Brunswick (page 40). The Digby Service Station postcard is the only copy discovered.

By the 1920s, gasoline was growing in importance over kerosene. Many Imperial Oil advertising covers of the period feature Premier Gasoline. The covers on pages 34-35 seem to favor ladies as drivers using Imperial Oil products.

In 1935 Imperial Oil began providing road maps at their Three Star dealers. Some maps covered large areas and others, such as the Halifax Citigram on page 44, covered cities.

In 1936 Hockey Night in Canada debuted on the radio, sponsored by Imperial Oil.

Page 45 features Imperial Oil credit cards from 1946 and 1970. The 1946 card is cardboard, not plastic, a very scarce item.

In the late 1940s, ESSO gasoline was introduced and foreign advertising covers appeared using the ESSO logo. Beginning in the 1960s, the ESSO logo replaced the Imperial Oil logo. As the last covers, dated in 1980, show, the Imperial Oil advertising on envelopes was replaced by ESSO.

Items of Note

Yellow dots indicate the most difficult items to obtain. I have run across these items only once in my collecting of Imperial Oil covers. Items were gathered from many different sources because few Imperial Oil covers were kept by stamp collectors. Much of the material was kept by non-collectors who stored it for their records and never threw it out.