



**A History of Henry R. Rouse
1823 – 1861**

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The following history of Henry R. Rouse was written by local oil historian and columnist Ernest C. Miller. It was originally published by the Warren Times-Observer. Date of publication is uncertain, perhaps the 1960's.

The Story of Henry Rouse –

It is safe to assume that most Warren County residents have heard of the Rouse Home at Youngsville, and believe that someone by the name of Rouse had something to do with it: that is true. But Henry R. Rouse was totally responsible for it and the story of his life has never been completely told. This is an attempt to do just that and to give Rouse the honor that is overdue him.

The casual motorist traveling along Pennsylvania's Route 8, just north of Oil City in the region of Rouseville, a few years ago would have seen an octagonal yellow sign perched atop an iron pipe planted close along the highway. Neither the sign nor the locality was impressive. Surrounding the site stood the ruins of an obsolete oil refinery with the iron guts of the plant twisted and rusted. The sign read,

**Famous Rouse Well
Drilled in April 17, 1861
15 lives Lost
13 Seriously Burned**

The old barrel house of the defunct Crystal Oil works serves as a fitting backdrop for this only visible remembrance of the first great oil disaster. The sign disappeared some time ago, but friendly natives will point out the spot for you.

The main actor in this drama, Henry R. Rouse, was the typical poor boy who grew rich through his own efforts and a little luck. He was in the oil business less than 19 months; he made his fortune from it and lost his life because of it. He died bravely, left his wealth wisely, and today is hardly remembered by posterity.

Our subject was born in the pleasant village of Westfield, NY, an old town in Chautauqua County, on October 9, 1823, and after attending the town school until he was 12 years of age, he was sent off to a select school in Jamestown. In a year he returned to Westfield and enrolled at the Westfield Academy where he spent two years and then commenced to "read law" in the office of Abram Dixon, a widely known attorney who later was a member of the New York State Senate.

How Rouse was ever financially able to attend the academy remains something of a mystery to this day for he left the institution owing part of his tuition. If he gained nothing else at the Academy, the teachers brought out of him his talent as a speaker and he was active in oratorical contests, debates and other events allowing a vocal display. Dr. Samuel S. Seward, father of William Seward, the U.S. Secretary of State who successfully negotiated the purchase of Alaska,

heard Rouse speak once at Westfield and was so amazed at his ability that he donated a sum of money towards his education.

The legal profession and pleading before the bar of justice was not to be for Rouse. He left Westfield suddenly with a single dollar in his pocket. There is an apocryphal story that Henry was disappointed in love and the intimation is strong that his anti-law decision was influenced by a young girl's lack of ardor.

Rouse walked southward, crossed the state line into Pennsylvania, and finally halted at the town of Warren. Opportunities in this town bordering the Allegheny River were few and money was scarce, but the newcomer must have seen the many rafts of lumber floating down the river to market, nor could he miss the wonderful forests surrounding the area and the fact that the only men of wealth and influence were those engaged in lumbering.

Hardly pausing in his journey, the stranger followed the winding river some 20 miles and stopped next at Tidioute, a small but booming lumber center where practically all the rivermen stopped overnight for rest and refreshment, with the stress often being on the refreshment side. The winter of 1840 found Rouse installed as the village school master at Tidioute and much of his pay he had to take in the form of sawed boards and shingles and other local produce as money was short for business purchases, let alone for paying school teachers.

The school master collected all his lumber in various forms, gathered additional quantities on credit, and sent the whole lot down the river where it was sold at Pittsburgh. With the income, the procedure was repeated again and again and soon Rouse was able to purchase an interest in a small sawmill in the woods back of Tidioute.

Once his appetite was whetted with this form of merchandising, he tired of the drabness of teaching and with Robert M. Brigham opened a general store at Enterprise in 1844, 12 miles from Tidioute. While this village was even smaller than Tidioute, it contained five lumber mills and was only seven miles from Titusville, another lumber center of operations.

As his store venture prospered, Rouse purchased additional lumber acreage as his funds permitted, and in less than 15 years owned a large farm, a thousand acres of pine timber, several sawmills and had interests with various partners.

Rouse was not married, indeed, apparently had no interest whatever in the ladies. He resided with the Thomas Morian family at Enterprise a few years ago, when Thomas's son Herbert was 97 years old, he was able to tell me about Rouse very clearly. He said, "Rouse was the kindest man I ever knew. We used to have traveling shows come to Titusville and Henry would give me some money and say 'Herbert, here's some money; get Jane, Evelyn, Dorothy and Pauline, and take them all to the show. And have a good time!' We could always depend on Henry to provide us with funds for such entertainment and he helped many needy families, was charitable to all, and was very well thought of."

Small of stature, unimpressive in appearance, Rouse was known throughout the region for his absolute honesty. His transactions were often shrewd but all agreed that he was a fair man and perhaps because of this trait as well as any other, he was urged to run for the Pennsylvania legislature. In 1858 he was elected by the Republicans to represent Crawford and Warren counties at Harrisburg and was re-elected the next year. During the campaign for the last election, Rouse was opposed by Jonathan Watson of Titusville, a famous lumberman and later a great oil pioneer. After the election the two men met and shook hands and they finally became good friends.

About this time news of a strange activity near Titusville came to Rouse. Some "Colonel" Drake from New Haven, probably a Connecticut Yankee, was drilling near an oil spring a few miles from the village. People jeered at his efforts, thought him to be "slightly 'teched" and gave him little attention, but the man had a certain dignity, perseverance and cool courage in the face of many difficulties. All this Rouse had heard and he thought he would probably like the man if he knew him.

Meanwhile the ventures in which Rouse had invested had been paying considerable dividends and unobtrusively the hardworking man started to enjoy life. In the summer of 1853 he took a lengthy trip to the West and wrote to friends, "Viewed as a landscape, the prairie does not meet my anticipation. 'Tis not relieved by forest, hill or dale. The eye is wearied with its changeless, unvaried prospect..."

Going to St. Paul he reported that, "We found a high floor in the Mississippi, yet the water is clear as the Allegheny."

With the eyes of a working lumber dealer, he noted that great numbers of lumber rafts were on the Mississippi, and he went ninety miles up the Wisconsin River to see a vast area of unsurveyed and virtually unknown pine forests.

Nearer to his home, he saw to it that poor children had proper clothing in which to attend school and often needy parents found their children arriving with a basket of badly needed groceries, a gift from Mr. Rouse who could vividly remember an earlier day when he did not always have what his stomach craved.

Robert Watson, a pleasant youngster who had a bad harelip, came under Rouse's observing eye and he sent him to a city where a capable surgeon repaired the damage at the lumberman's expense.

Rouse hired a young man to drive his rig for him, to care for his horse, and to attend to other odd jobs as they came up; this hired boy was Myron Dunham. On August 27, 1859, Rouse and Dunham were in Meadville where they had gone to allow Rouse to do a little campaigning for the next election, and on this day Drake's luck changed for the better and he "struck oil" thus bringing into being the world's first commercial oil well and, unknowingly, starting one of the nation's greatest industries.

Rouse at once appreciated some of the potentialities of crude petroleum and he was astute enough to move promptly to benefit from his opinion.

Evidence indicates that Rouse must have stopped in Titusville on his trip home from Meadville and consulted with his friend, William Barnsdall. Barnsdall was a shoemaker by trade but was not cut from the ordinary last for he was a shoemaker with money, a prominent citizen, and a member of Titusville's first city council. These two men enlisted the aid of Bonne Meade, a Warren merchant and banker, and the three of them leased the James Parker farm, located less than half a mile from Drake's well. They at once started to drill a well, specifically the second successful well in the world put down to secure oil.

This well, generally known as "The Barnsdall", was kicked down, that is, a fifteen foot length of elastic pole made of ash or hickory, was arranged over the well hole, and it was worked as a fulcrum by attaching stirrups to the end of it. Two men each placed a foot in the stirrups and by a kind of kicking process brought the pole down and produced the motion necessary to work the bit. The strokes were rapid and the elasticity of the pole raised the drilling tools after each downward thrust.

The well reached oil in November, 1859, but only five barrels a day could be recovered and Meade and Rouse wanted to give up and try another location. But Barnsdall had greater faith, telling his partners, "It's a long way to China from the bottom of that hole, but I'm bound to bore for tea leaves if I don't hit the grease first!"

Urged on by Barnsdall's unlimited faith, the triumvirate started to drill deeper. In February 1860, while the drill was still descending, a storekeeper from Newton Falls, Ohio, William Abbott, arrived in Titusville; he had heard rumors about this crude oil craze and had come over to see what was happening. While he stayed only two days, in that time he purchased three one-eighth interests in the Rouse-Barnsdall-Meade enterprise and as luck would have it, two days after he returned to Ohio the driller struck another vein of oil and after the well was tubed it turned out an average of sixty barrels a day. Expenses on the well were \$3,000 but it produced four months and a net profit of \$13,000 was made from the oil sold from it.

Even before "The Barnsdall" well had proved itself, Rouse had made up his mind that the oil business was here to stay and he had talked with Archie and James Buchanan, farmers along oil creek, and arranged to lease their farms for oil purposes. Spreading his risks as any good business man would do, Rouse entered into a partnership with John L. Mitchell of Enterprise and Samuel Q. Brown of Pleasantville, and the three of them leased the Buchanan farms of 274 and 151 acres respectively. A cash amount was paid for each lease and one-quarter of the oil was to go to the owners as royalty. The leases were dated July 2, 1860.

In the fall of 1860, Rouse brought his cousin, George H. Dimick, a twenty-one year old school teacher and principal, from Milwaukee to the oil regions and delegated him as manager of the two Buchanan farms. Rouse had no doubt met Dimick on his western trip a few years earlier and had thought of him when he needed a confidential clerk and manager. With his work in the Pennsylvania legislature and his many lumber and oil interests, he was hard pressed for time and must have welcomed competent assistance.

One well started on the Buchanan lands had been disappointing, drilling had been halted on it in October 1860, and later the well and surrounding land of ten square rods were sub leased to Little and Merrick, partners. In the spring of 1861 they started drilling the well deeper and when a depth of 320 feet was reached, the auger struck a large pocket of gas and oil and the crude leaped through the six inch casing and flowed sixty feet in the air, high over the wooden derrick.

On the evening of April 17, 1861, Henry Rouse was sitting with a group of men in St. Anthony's Hotel (later the Cherry Run Hotel) a rough boarding house near the well. They had finished dinner and were discussing the fall of Fort Sumpter, news of which had just been received in this remote area. Rouse was talking with Captain John B. McNair when a greasy workman stuck his head in the door and shouted, "We've hit a big one Mr. Rouse, better come and see it!"

As he banged the door and disappeared, the entire group jumped up and rushed towards the well, that is all except George Dimick who could not see the man who was to team the barrels to the well in case oil was found; he headed in exactly the opposite direction to get the barrels started towards the well in an effort to save the oil.

Dimick's devotion to duty doubtless saved his life!

After he had the barrels going towards the well, which took only a few minutes to arrange, he turned and ran towards Rouse who was standing with Willis Benedict within twenty feet of the shaft. When he was about one hundred yards from the derrick, an explosion rent the air and at once the well, with oil spurting high overhead, and an acre of marshy oil soaked ground surrounding the site, was aflame. The explosion was plainly heard at Plummer, six miles away.

Dimick wrote a complete report of the event later and it is much too long to reprint it in detail here. However, as it is the only complete report, the important sections of it are given here. Said Dimick,

"Above the well and against the foot of the hill had been rolled two long tiers of barrels. One of the victims it would seem had been standing on these barrels near the well when the explosion occurred; for I first discovered him running over them away from the well. He had hardly reached the outer edge of the field of fire, when coming to a vacant space in the tier of barrels from which two or three had been taken, he fell into the vacancy, and there uttering heart-rending shrieks, burned to death with scarcely a dozen feet of impassable heated air between him and his friends.

"So numerous were the victims of this fire and so conspicuous, as they rushed out, enveloped in flame, that it would not be exaggeration to compare them to a rapid succession of shots from an immense Roman candle."

Relative to the location of the gusher, Dimick explained,

"A few rods up the hill, and a little south of the well issued a spring, which had formed a small ravine in running down, and created something of a swamp at the bottom and around the well. The well must have commenced flowing at the rate of three thousand barrels per day, and

although but eighteen or twenty minutes of flowing preceded the explosion yet the little swamp was covered deep with oil, excepting several small elevations on which the astonished spectators were standing when the shock occurred.

Dimick next tells what happened to Mr. Rouse in these words,

“Mr. Rouse standing probably within twenty feet of the well and among the very nearest of the spectators did not lose possession of his mind for an instant. He remembered the ravine, and dashed toward it. In the breast pocket of his coat was a book containing valuable papers, and in the pocket of his pantaloons a wallet containing a large sum of money. These he jerked from their places and threw them far outside of the fire where they were afterwards found in safety. He had accomplished but half a dozen steps when he stumbled and fell, still being within the circuit of the fire. He buried his face in the mud to prevent inhalation of the flames; then recovering himself bounded up the ravine, falling for a second time completely exhausted at a point where two men barely endured the heat long enough to seize and drag him forth.”

And Rouse’s death was reported in these words,

“He was taken to a shanty nearby, placed upon the bed of a workman, and gasped through five hours of excruciating agony before death gave relief. His body from the top of his head and legs to the knees was burned to a crisp. The front of his person being less exposed was less seriously injured, but the face and feet were the only portions so far escaping, as to remain in any degree natural. The former was partially protected by the ground when he fell, and the latter by high-topped boots. Of his clothing which was very heavy, but a handful of shreds remained.”

Uriah Smith and E.N. Wheeler, the men who dragged Rouse from the fire circle, placed him in a drilling shanty belonging to Colonel A.S.Prather and a sheet hanging from a nearby clothes line was ripped down and Rouse was tightly wrapped in it to keep the air away from him as much as possible.

The small circle of men who crowded into the shanty around Rouse fed him water from a teaspoon, drop by drop, and he talked slowly and painfully. He asked for Allen Wright, one of his managers and a close friend, but he was not immediately at hand and so N.F. Jones volunteered to write Rouse’s will.

In dictating it in twenty-three sections, remembering relatives, friends, and the brave men who pulled him from the fire, he ended by giving the entire balance of his estate to the Commissioners of Warren County, half to be used for the benefit of the poor and half for improving the roads. He was unable to write so several men rolled him on his side, placed a pen in his hand, and aided him in making his mark. By this time Allen Wright had arrived and was among the witnesses to the document.

Dr. S.S. Christy of Oil City had been summoned and he also signed the will as a witness. Then Rouse asked him, “I will to know my exact condition.”

“Henry, you will have to die and that soon,” said the physician quietly.

Just before Rouse lost consciousness, a clergyman appeared and asked permission to offer religious consolation but the dying man refused with these words, "My account is already made up. If I am a debtor, it would be cowardly to ask for credits now."

And so died a brave oil man, as the pastor, nodding his head slowly in amazement, stood in the background.

The body was placed in a rough coffin and taken to Enterprise where it was transferred to a fine cherry coffin fashioned by Gates Burrows, Taken by train from Garland to Erie, the cherry coffin was sealed in a metal vault and Rouse was taken to Westfield where he was buried alongside his mother as requested.

What caused this tragic fire? The first story was that someone near the well had been smoking a cigar but this tale was soon discarded; first, no one was ever able to say that anyone near the well had been smoking, and second, it was well known that Henry Rouse was extremely careful to take every precaution against fire at all his wells or any he was interested in.

Years later, an unidentified author wrote that he had been present at the disaster and had attempted to have the workers at the Wadsworth well, close by, extinguish their boiler fire, but they refused and the explosion followed in less than 5 minutes.

The fire raged days burning the Dobbs, Mason, Wadsworth, and Maxwell-Rice wells having a combined total production of 2,000 barrels of oil; Buchanan's barn and all the contents went up in the holocaust. Finally, by tunneling in from the bank of Oil creek, the excess oil was conveyed by a ditch to the stream and beyond the reach of the fire, and the fire was gradually smothered by earth and manure.

Normally, this would be the end to such a story. But as news of the contents of Rouse's will traveled through the area, it was printed in part, or incorrectly, and confused the entire population. For example, one newspaper printed what was claimed to be the complete will on May 29, 1861, but it really was less than half of it though the will had been probated in the same town four weeks earlier.

Several weeks later, when the news was definitely known that Rouse had left the bulk of his estate for the use of Warren County, Judge W.D. Brown of Warren was in the village of Sugar Grove with a group of friends. George Buell, a former County Commissioner, asked the jurist if there was a not a law that would deprive the county of this fortune, and Brown, perplexed and suddenly alarmed, avoided any direct answer.

The next morning the judge repaired to his library and soon found to his astonishment that Buell had been right for Pennsylvania had passed an act in 1855 that provided bequests to a body corporate or person, in trust for religious and charitable purposes, were void and went to the next of kin unless made a full calendar month before the death of the testator. Rouse had made his will only a few hours before his death.

To make matters worse, the County Commissioners at this time had nothing to do with the support of the poor or the improvement and maintenance of roads.

Unwilling to let the matter rest, Judge Brown found that Myron Waters of Warren, long a friend of both Henry Rouse and his father Samuel, were willing to help save the money for the county. Waters and Brown journeyed to Enterprise to see Samuel Rouse to whom the estate would go when voided by statute. After carefully explaining what his son had intended to do, Waters persuaded Samuel to deed his title as next of kin to Myron Waters in exchange for \$8,000. Sam Rouse did as requested.

By March of the next year, of the executors of the estate, George H. Dimick had left to join the Army, Samuel Q. Brown and Samuel Rouse declined to act further; the court discharged these men and appointed Myron Waters as administrator, thus putting him in the unusual position as first trustee under the deed from Samuel Rouse, and next as administrator of Henry's will.

After some legal maneuvering by an Act of Assembly approved April 6, 1862, the County Commissioners and their successors were made a corporate body under the name of "Commissioners of the Rouse Estate," and were authorized to accept from Waters the balance of the Rouse funds and this same act also empowered the Commissioners to support the poor of the county.

On November 17, 1863, Myron Waters assigned all personal property and all real estate of the Rouse Estate to the county after he had received reimbursement for his initial outlay of \$8,000 plus interest and other expenses. The total sum realized was just over \$186,000 which on a competitive basis of the dollar then and now would be over a million dollars.

There were some veiled mutterings that Waters made plenty of money, that the oil holdings of Rouse were not properly disposed of and should have yielded the county at least half a million dollars, but no place can a single word of thanks or appreciation be found for either Judge Brown or Myron Waters, men whose foresight saved the money for the taxpayers.

Several cried loudly that George Dimick mismanaged the Rouse lumber and oil properties, then absconded and took most of the cash with him. One writer put it this way,

"Mr. Dimick, whom Rouse had put more particularly in charge of his business, ran away, a large defaulter to the estate."

Many oil historians claim that George Dimick went away only to join "Scott's 900," or the Eleventh New York Cavalry Regiment of the northern army; that he went in as a private but came out as a Captain. They are troubled by being unable to find Dimick listed among the 1,733 officers and men who belonged to this excellent outfit during the Civil War as he is not mentioned in the text.

Actually, he entered under the name of George D. Dennison because, as he stated in his application for a pension years later,

“... the reason I assumed the name of George D. Dennison was in order to prevent my mother and other members of the family from knowing that I joined ‘Scott’s 900’ and thus avoiding strenuous efforts, which I believed they would make, to get me released from active service.”

After the war it was well known that Dimick live in Sheffield for some years and there were no levies made against him at any time. In 1865, operating with Captain Peter Grace of Jamestown, New York, he became a large oil operator and was one of those who opened up the famous Cherry Grove field in 1882. History marks Mr. Dimick as a man of honor.

In 1865, the Warren County Commissioners, using Rouse funds, purchased 400 acres of land just east of the village of Youngsville. The cost was \$13,500. The erected a large two-story brick building promptly. A marble monument in memory of Mr. Rouse was also erected and on one side is inscribed the words from his will where he left the balance of his estate to the county.

Various additions and other buildings have been built as needed and the Rouse Home, well-kept and up to date, serves the poor of the county exactly as Mr. Rouse intended. It is a county show place.

For many years, a popular belief throughout northwestern Pennsylvania has been that the Rouse Estate funds would be lost to the county if a person was ever sentenced and put to death by the Warren County Courts. Some years ago, when Judge Alexander C. Flick was living, he dispelled the rumor time and time again in speeches before many civic groups, yet the story is still rampant today. It gained new credence some years ago after Governor George Leader of Pennsylvania

commuted the death penalty of Norman W. Moon, convicted slayer of former Judge Allison D. Wade, to life imprisonment after he was found mentally ill. One thing people think is certain; if you want to commit murder as safely as it can be done in Pennsylvania, then Warren County is the place to do it!



Rouse has not been totally forgotten today. The Warren County Commissioners visit and decorate his grave in Westfield, New York, just before Memorial Day every year and the handsome grave marker was supplied by them. A fine oil portrait of the benefactor hangs in the courthouse and another in the halls of the Warren County Historical Society. [Another is located in the lobby of The Rouse Home.]

Inside the Rouse Home, protected by a glass case, you can see the charred leather boots he wore when the burning oil fair caused his death.

[These boots are now in the possession of the Warren County Historical Society according to a receipt in the Trustee Minute book.]



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The legacy of Henry R. Rouse lives on through the services offered by the Rouse Estate. The “old” Rouse buildings, which served for over 100 years as the county poor farm, have been replaced by the Rouse Home, a lovely 176-bed nursing facility, and the Suites at Rouse, a beautiful 66-apartment personal care home. The Rouse has also added Rouse Rehab, an outpatient rehabilitation facility, Rouse Children’s Center, a child daycare facility which operates in the heart of downtown Youngsville, and Bridges Adult Day Service, located in downtown Warren. Consistent with its mission, Rouse continually seeks to understand and serve the needs of Warren County, its people and its economic development.

The original marble monument from 1865 was rededicated to Henry Rouse’s memory during a ceremony on August 21, 1993, during the thirteenth annual Rouse Family Picnic. It now marks the entrance to the Rouse Home as a testimony to Henry Rouse’s philanthropy, and a reminder of the important role played by the Rouse in serving the needs of the Warren County community.

