

Ernest Kells in Persia

Title Text: International Oil Drillers

Excerpt from the International Driller Tent Exhibit at the Oil Museum of Canada

[*Film rolling*]



[A curtain opens. An actor is shaving his face and talking to the audience. A newspaper appears with the headline "Keeping Up Appearances". The actor stands in front of a photo of a ruined building and picks up a book.]

Actor: [*Humming*] Oh, I beg your pardon! Sorry, about the... Now, why did they do it, risk their lives, their health, leave their wives and their families behind? [*Sound of drums, children*] Was it the money? The adventure? The chance to travel to exotic new worlds? Take Ernie Kells for instance.



[A series of photos is shown including ones of International Driller Ernie Kells standing in front of a car, oil rigs, and his passport. A map is displayed that labels Persia, followed by photographs and a copy of Kells' oil drilling contract.]

Actor: Ernie Kells started his career working on Lambton oil rigs at the age of 17. He moved onto New Brunswick and Quebec projects but there was little oil to be found there. By the age of 20, he found himself in Persia and Mesopotamia. There wasn't much to do in the desert but work, sleep, and read. From one of many of Ernie's letters, [country accent] "You worked about 10 hours a day and six days a week. I was young. I had good health. You get malaria fever occasionally but you'd get over that. Every few years, you'd get an outbreak of cholera and that would kill a pile of the native people. There was a bit of bubonic plague, but not much. Cholera was the worst." If the disease didn't get you, then it might have been the snipers taking shots at drillers, or a knife slitting your throat in the night. But for those who survived the dangers and illness, there was a small fortune to be made. In the 1920s, Ernie was earning 312 dollars a month, a small fortune in those days. Kells returned to Petrolia in 1932, married a school teacher and bought an oil field of his own.

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