Background

The Institute for the History of Technology and Industrial Archaeology (IHTIA) and the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) have a long-standing interest in the early petroleum industry. Beginning with Colonel Edwin Drake’s well at Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1858 until the early twentieth century, most of the United States’ oil supply was produced east of the Mississippi River in the Appalachian Mountains of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky, where the basic tools and machinery of industrialized petroleum production were perfected. Beginning around 1880, oil producers pumped much of this oil from the ground using a technique called central power pumping, by which a steam or gas engine provided the power to operate pump jacks located at dozens of distant wells. Transmitting power hundreds of yards, over and around obstacles, etc., to numerous jacks required an ingenious system of reciprocating rods or cables called jerker lines. Central power and jerker lines fell into disuse by ca. 1950. Allegheny National Forest (ANF), in the hills of northwestern Pennsylvania, is littered with the remains of central power systems and the buildings that housed them.

Scope

In 1997 IHTIA, HAER, and ANF entered into a tripartite agreement to record six central-power pumping systems within the Forest boundaries. The project team consisted of six members who spent one month on site collecting data, and approximately 10 months at IHTIA headquarters completing measured drawings and histories.

Results

The team produced fourteen measured drawings and 100 large-format photos documenting the six pumping installations. The project historian produced six site histories and an extended context recounting the history of Pennsylvania oil production and central power machinery. The completed material was accepted into the HAER Collection at the Library of Congress.

Principal Investigator: Michael W. Caplinger