



EXPLORER

J. Elmer Thomas, Sicily and the Ragusa Oil Field

July 2017 | By Albert W. Bally



The AAPG has always played an important role in my professional life. Early in my career, I had the good fortune to have met J. Elmer Thomas, the founding president of the AAPG. This was an important event in helping me down the early paths of my profession.

Some time between 1930 and 1933, Thomas presented some of his ideas about the oil resources of Sicily to representatives of the Italian government. At the time I was 7 and 8 years old, attending a German school in Rome, and was daily exposed to life under Benito Mussolini and the frequent visits of Nazi dignitaries.

After 1933, Thomas himself no longer pursued any direct contacts in Italy. However, in 1948, two years after I began my doctoral work in central Italy, Thomas requested exploration permits in Sicily for SIARP (Società Italo Americana Ricerche e Prodotti di Petroleo), which were subsequently transferred to the American International Fuel and Petroleum Company (AIFP Co.).

In early 1949, Eduard Trümpy, then at Gulf Oil, asked me to take a break from my doctoral thesis research to map the surface geology of southeast Sicily. I accepted the job only after my professor, Wolfgang Leupold, assured me that his earlier offer to become his well-paid teaching assistant at the ETH (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) in Zurich remained open for me when I returned from Sicily.

A Wild Summer in Sicily

During the very long, hot summer of 1949, I mapped the Ragusa-Pachino Plateau of southeast Sicily, i.e. the area of Thomas' exploration permit.

On our way to Ragusa in southeast Sicily, Trümpy and I first stopped by the Istituto Geografico Militare in Florence to pick up the topographic base maps of southeast Sicily. After arriving in Rome, I stayed with my parents while Trümpy checked into a nearby hotel.

I vaguely remember briefly meeting with Thomas in the Hotel Ambasciatori in Rome where, together with Trümpy, we all met with Avvocato Pignatelli, Gulf Oil's representative in Rome. Later, we also met with Ramiro Fabiani, a professor at the University of Rome. Fabiani was of critical importance to our enterprise, as he had taught at the University of Palermo from 1925 to 1943.

At the time, aside from being fluent in Italian, my principal qualification was that I had been mapping in the central Apennine Mountains for my doctoral thesis area (today, my entire thesis area has become the «Parco Nazionale della Maiella»). Alas, at the time, I did lack some other important qualifications – I was unable to drive a car, so Trümpy had to drive me into the field every day and pick me up in the evening.

An amusing anecdote: we drove a very long car designed for funerals ("pompe funebre" in Italian, i.e., a hearse). One advantage of this hearse was that there was enough space to hold all our field gear. Also, at the end of the mapping season, I was able to transport key samples of measured sections for further micro-paleontologic studies back to Switzerland.

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Historical Highlights



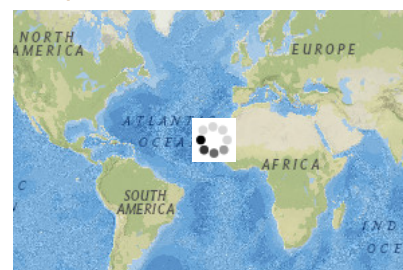
Albert "Bert" Bally, an AAPG Honorary Member, was born in The Hague, The Netherlands, and spent his early years in Indonesia, Italy, and Switzerland. At the University of Zurich

(where he specialized in paleontology) he wrote his doctoral thesis on the mapping of an area in the Central Apennines. For a major part of his career, Bally worked for Shell Oil. While with Shell Canada, he spent several summers mapping the Rocky Mountains and foothills of Alberta. Later he became their chief geologist, then transferred to Shell USA and progressed from manager of geologic research to chief geologist to senior consultant. In 1981 he joined Rice University as chairman of the Department of Geology and Geophysics. He was also appointed the Harry Carothers Weiss Professor of Geology, a position he still occupies.

A history-based series, Historical Highlights is an ongoing EXPLORER series that celebrates the "eureka" moments of petroleum geology, the rise of key concepts, the discoveries that made a difference, the perseverance and ingenuity of our colleagues – and/or their luck! – through stories that emphasize the anecdotes, the good yarns and the human interest side of our E&P profession. If you have such a story – and who doesn't? – and you'd like to share it with your fellow AAPG Members, contact the editor.

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Map



One time, just after Eduard dropped me off in the field, I was arrested by the police ("polizia"), who had been waiting for me because they thought I was the guy who in the previous few weeks had stolen chickens in the area. It was my good luck that during the previous week, Trümpy and I had driven to Palermo and met with the Franco Restivo, who at the time was the president of the then Autonomous Region of Sicily. So, soon after my arrest, I was released after the police had called the authorities in Ragusa.

And, speaking of the "good old days," note that at the same time, the legendary bandit Salvatore Giuliano was roaming in area south of Palermo.

Luckily, at the time, my qualifications for the job far out-weighed my significant "disqualifications." My English was non-existent at that time because, while attending high school in Switzerland, I was given the opportunity to study another language, and I chose Italian because I was already fluent. (Of course, as a "gymnasium" student, I also had to take Latin). Thus, after long days in the field in Sicily, my boss asked me to write my progress reports in English during the evenings, assisted only with a German-English dictionary and Lahee's classic on Field Geology. Trümpy, most graciously, then took time to edit my reports for the Gulf Oil supervisors in London.

On the other hand, as a well-trained micro-paleontologist, I was able diagnose the "macro -forams" and other macro fossils that I had collected in the field.

Discovery

At the end of my long spring and summer of 1949, I had to rank all of the prospects that I defined in my mapping. Among the dozen prospects, the Ragusa structure was at the top of list because it coincided with the Ragusa Asphalt Mines. Four years later, in 1953, the Ragusa prospect became the 300 million barrel Ragusa Oil field

Just imagine Thomas, who passed away late 1949, receiving this good news while resting in "the happy hunting grounds."

The good news was that for my work in Sicily, \$300 (U.S.) was deposited in my bank account in Switzerland one month later. Thus, I was able to save a sizable amount of money prior to drawing a good salary as a teaching assistant at ETH. In addition, I was paid for mapping in the Swiss Alps on a project related to the construction of a large hydro-electrical power station project.

All these activities allowed me to get married and start raising a family. I owe a great debt to J. Elmer Thomas for the great role he played in helping me launch my career.

(For an early report on this discovery, see "The Ragusa Oil Field, Sicily," by F. T. Kafka and R.K. Kirkbridge.)

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