

'I Had To Make My Own Way'

Self-Education Spells Success For Driller

By BILL VIRGIN
Of The Daily Mail Staff

SPENCER — Allegheny and Western Energy Co. lists Richard L. Mann in its chart of corporate hierarchy as vice president in charge of field operations, and president of Petro Services.

So who is this man in work clothes with the purposeful stride, the quiet voice, the soft eyes that rarely close for sleep, and forearms as solid as gas-field pipe.

This is Dick Mann; nominally he carries the pinstriped titles of vice president and president, but it is his 39 years of experience and the depth of his knowledge that earn him respect in the Roane County gas fields.

His career in the gas fields started as a ninth-grader in Illinois, when he "went in one door and out the other." He'd been roughnecking (working on a drill rig crew) and the pay, 99 cents an hour, seemed fabulous.

"We never had nothing; I had to make my own way," Mann says. "That was big money then. The oil fields paid the biggest wages."

It was the end of his formal education, and the beginning of a lifetime worth of oil-field education. He started in Dumas, Texas, in 1943, a 16-year-old on a crew that also included a 62-year-old man. "You couldn't get help because of the war," he remembers. "I worked 12 hours a day in Texas. There were no hands available."

Following a two-year stint in the Army, Mann began a career as a "tool pusher" on rigs, working across the Midwest, into the East, finally landing

in West Virginia. He and his brother, both working on a storage field in 1962 near New Martinsville, pooled their money and bought their first drilling rig.

"We had \$1,800 between us and the insurance cost us \$900," he says. "We didn't know if we could make it the first week."

But make it they did. In fact that first year they drilled 35 wells. By 1969 Mann Drilling had sunk more than 350 wells through Roane, Braxton and Doddridge counties.

That year the Manns sold out their drilling business to Ray Resources. "It was just a chance to make some money," he says. "We'd made money up to that point but not a great deal."

Mann stayed with Ray Resources as superintendent of field operations, but still had the itch to be out on his own. So in 1976 he and Dave Freshwater began Petro Services, an oil and gas supply and service firm. Petro Services became part of Allegheny and Western in 1981. Mann and Freshwater have also drilled 75 wells of their own.

For a man with no formal education beyond the eighth grade, Mann is an accomplished manager and geologist, the sort of talent born only from experience. Others marvel at his home-taught ability to interpret logs, and to remember the production history of wells drilled in his territory. He has the talent to expect the unexpected and the ability to stay calm when the unexpected arrives.

On the morning of an interview, Mann had a relatively light schedule of problems to juggle: a road made so sog-

gy by repeated rain that trucks couldn't get back to a well site; water trucks needed when all were tied up on other jobs; and a gas pipeline broken by a fallen tree.

"It's a fascinating business; you learn something new every day," he says. "The man who tells you he knows it all in this business is a liar."

He may not know it all, but he may come as close as anyone else. In fact Anthony F. Altmann, vice president of Allegheny and Western, says Mann's knowledge makes it unnecessary to keep a geologist on the staff. Mann and trained geologists have clashed often about where to drill a well for good gas production; Mann has usually been proven right.

"We've been wrong several times," Mann says, then adding, "We've been pretty fortunate. But we know the area, too."

Although he carries titles of president of one firm and vice president of another, Mann is not desk-bound. Soon after settling the morning's round of problems he is out inspecting well sites.

His moves around the stump of pipe that constitutes a gas well show the nearly 40 years of experience. He lugs a wrench to the valve and opens it, sending a white plume of natural gas 20 feet into the air at more than a thousand pounds of pressure, with such a roar that bystanders need earplugs. Just as calmly, Mann walks back to the wellhead, closes the valve, and the gas plume disappears.

Later he strides through the mud of another well site at which nitrogen and sand are forced into the beds of shale to force gas to the well.

Now that natural gas prices have risen to the point that Appalachia has become an attractive place to drill, counties like Roane are being overrun by newcomers seeking quick money. Mann shakes his head when he considers "a lot who don't know what they're doing. They're in trouble all the time. I've helped a lot of people, and I'll help a lot more, I figure."

As if the oil-field activity weren't enough, Mann has filled his life with a myriad of projects. He and his wife, Mary, live on a 70-acre farm along U.S. 119 south of Spencer, on which he raises 17 head of cattle. The only other assistance on the farm is a dog, which never has been named. Mann cuts hay at the farm, built a fence around the land, and constructed a huge barn entirely from scrap oil-field material. Next door is a 40-lot mobile home park which he built and his wife manages.

But he finds nothing unusual in this frenzy of work. Mann says it probably developed in those first years as a well-hand. "That's where I got hustling the way I do," he says. "Back then if you goofed up there would be someone right there to take your job. The generation now says I'm crazy to work that hard. I might be, but I was born and raised that way."

Although gas demand has fallen slightly, Mann expects gas drilling in central West Virginia to pick



A NATURAL COMBINATION: DICK MANN AND A GAS WELL

Daily Mail Photo by Bill Virgin

up again soon. And when it does, it stands to reason Dick Mann will be in the middle of it.

"It gets in your blood and you can't get rid of it," he says. "Shale will be

here for a long time. We've not even touched it yet. Money for drilling has tightened up this year, but my gosh, all the land is leased out here. It's going to get better."