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1 mysterious company, 603 abandoned oil wells

Tribune investigation shows Fireball was able to evade responsibility, exposing communities to contaminants and saddling Illinois with millions in cleanup costs

By Jonathan Bullington and Adriana Pérez | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CUMBERLAND COUNTY — There seems to be few people around these days who know much, if anything, about Fireball Production Inc. Not the oil industry leaders. Not the state regulators. Not the residents of this downstate county littered with hundreds of holes in the ground.

They apparently hadn't heard, or couldn't remember, that 36 years ago, with global oil prices in a free fall, the oddly named company made an odd business decision: It purchased hundreds of aging wells in a depleted oil field.

The company claimed the wells would be sold for parts and then plugged. But staff at the Illinois Department of Mines and Minerals — then the agency tasked with overseeing oil production — suspected something was amiss with the sale. They asked the state attorney general's office for help collecting unpaid fees that, by the spring of 1991, had reached \$45,500.

"Certainly," a department attorney wrote to the AG's office, "there is a sense that this may have been a fraudulent conveyance."

Neither agency, though, could save Illinois from the far steeper financial burden that lay ahead, or the environmental hazards those abandoned wells would pose.

Above: An abandoned well rests in farmland near Casey, Ill., on Feb. 11. According to Illinois Department of Natural Resources records, it appears to be an abandoned Fireball well. The mysterious company abandoned 603 wells in Illinois.

E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A four-month Chicago Tribune investigation, drawing on hundreds of pages of previously unreleased public records and interviews with former state officials and oil operators, has revealed the startling ease with which Fireball was able to evade its legal responsibility for plugging wells that have stopped producing, exposing downstate communities to a host of contaminants — above and below ground — while saddling the state with millions in cleanup costs.

In Fireball's case, state data show, the company ultimately abandoned 603 wells.

Its sudden and short-lived foray into Illinois' oil business is estimated to cost the state around \$24 million.

See **FIREBALL** on Page A12

'Our friend in Burr Ridge'

Restaurant owner in Indiana gambling case once featured in Outfit beating plot

By Jason Meisner
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The plot to hire some mob-connected tough guys to break the legs of a debtor allegedly began in May 2013 with vague talk over a wire-tapped phone call about a popular restaurateur in Chicago's western suburbs, federal court records show.

"Well uh, our other friend over there in Burr Ridge wants to talk to us about a job," reputed soldier Paul Carparelli told his accomplice, George Brown, a beefy labor union bodyguard, according to the records. "I'll go meet him and see what it is and I'll brief ya on it. ... He says it's a money maker."

The "friend" in Burr Ridge was Filippo "Gigi" Rovito, the owner of Capri Ristorante, an old-school staple known for its "Wise Guy" meatballs and frequented by politicians and mobsters alike, the court records show. And the job? Help Rovito's friend, Outfit associate Michael "Mickey" Davis, send a discreet but violent message to a Melrose Park car dealer who owed him \$300,000.

Carparelli assembled a crew to get the beating done, and picked up a \$5,000 down payment from Davis at Capri. But the assault never took place. It turned out that Brown was cooperating with the FBI, leading to a slew of indictments that sent Carparelli, Davis and several others to federal prison — but not Rovito, who was never charged.

Now, more than a decade later, Rovito has been named in another federal case with plenty of mob flavor: "Operation Porterhouse Parlay," a sprawling investigation into an illicit sports gambling ring allegedly based out of two Greek-

See **GAMBLING** on Page A4

Little light shed on who runs nonprofits

Almost none comply with law meant to expose diversity gaps

By Dan Petrella
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

As June 2024 came to a close, Gov. JB Pritzker was characteristically bullish while he marked the end of Pride Month by signing into law a requirement that Illinois' largest nonprofit foundations disclose the demographic makeup of their boards of directors and officers.

"Here in Illinois, we reject hate,

bigotry, and discrimination and embrace the ethos of Pride through not only our laws but through our actions and shared values," Pritzker said in a statement released after a bill signing event at the Fat Cat bar and restaurant in Uptown. He soon added that the disclosure requirement represented an expansion of his "administration's work to better serve the LGBTQ+ community of Illinois."

But nearly two years later, the measure has shed little light on who actually runs these organizations — and may never do so.

As of mid-April, only three of

the largest grantmaking foundations in Illinois had published the required demographic information on their websites as the law outlines — disclosing the makeup of their leadership across categories including LGBTQ+ identity, gender, race and ethnicity, disability status and military service: the MacArthur Foundation, the Polk Bros. Foundation and the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, according to a Tribune review. A fourth, the Chicago Community Trust, had some demographic information available on its website and

See **NONPROFITS** on Page A6



State Sen. Adriane Johnson, right, speaks to state Sen. Omar Aquino on the Senate floor before the session begins at the Illinois Capitol building in Springfield on May 7. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



CHICAGO SPORTS

Remembering Sianis and love of baseball

As the City Series between the Cubs and White Sox plays out on the South Side, Sam Sianis and the Curse of the Billy Goat remind Chicago fans why we love baseball and its myths, writes Paul Sullivan.

E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE

OPINION CHICAGO 2050

Building the city for a bright future

At its core, Chicago 2050 is about delivering on a simple truth: that every resident in every neighborhood is able to live, work and thrive in a safe and affordable city, Mayor Brandon Johnson writes. **Page B2**

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WEATHER FORECAST

TODAY H:86 L:71
MON. H:83 L:71
TUE. H:79 L:49
Complete details on Page A22

INDEX

Almanac A17
Crossword ... In Comics
Editorials B1
Horoscope ... In Comics
Letters B3
Obituaries A18

Rides G7
Success G4
Television E7

178th year No. 137

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Bird and beast experiences run the gamut



Rick Steves

I will never forget my first “hawk walk.” It was at the Ireland School of Falconry (just outside of Cong, north of Galway), where a great guide showed our tour group how to properly handle birds of prey.

For about an hour, we wandered through the enchanting grounds of Ashford Castle, with our guide sporting a Harris hawk on his forearm. After learning about falconry, each person in our group got an opportunity to “fly” the bird — tossing and catching it on his or her arm. With each toss, the glove was rotated to the next person, and the guide tucked a little chicken meat in the padded palm — and the hawk knew just where to return. The experience was both intimate and intense.

Throughout Europe, you’ll find vivid and memorable animal demonstrations and experiences. They run the gamut, from famous festivals like Pamplona’s Running of the Bulls or Siena’s Palio horse race, to routine rituals like sheep shearing or hawk holding. Whether big and raucous or small and personal, I always find these experiences fascinating.

At Château de Cheverny in France’s Loire Valley, barking dogs remind visitors that the viscount, who still lives there, loves to hunt. Visitors enjoy a peek at the dogs in their kennel, a glimpse at their training regimen, and if it’s mealtime and you’re lucky... the fun of seeing the dogs eat.

These days, feedings are rarely open to the public. But on the off chance they’re offered, it’s a memorable sight. I once saw 120 hounds — half English foxhound and half French



At the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez, Spain, horses perform an equestrian ballet. **DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI**

Poitou — get worked up knowing that red meat was on the way. The trainer — who somehow knows every dog’s name — corralled them and spread out the feast. As the dogs are fed just once a day, the excitement was palpable. The trainer opened the gate and maintained discipline as the dogs, who can only eat when given the go-ahead, gathered enthusiastically around the food. It was an exercise in control... until the signal announced: it’s chow time.

In Vienna, a cultural highlight is seeing the Lipizzaner stallions perform at the magnificent Spanish Riding School. These regal white horses are a creation of Habsburg Archduke Charles, who imported Andalusian horses from

Habsburg-ruled Spain and then bred them with a local line. They’re known for their noble gait and Baroque profile.

One Sunday morning, I decided to drop in on a performance. I ducked through a royal passageway and paid about \$30 for a standing-room spot to see the stallions prance to Viennese classical music in the emperor’s chandeliered riding hall. While watching, it occurred to me that they prance in 4/4 time... even though this is the city of the waltz — which is in 3/4.

Equally impressive is the horse show at the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez, Spain. Here, horses — both purebred Spanish horses and larger mixed breeds — perform an equestrian

ballet with choreography, purely Spanish music, and costumes from the 19th century. The stern riders command their talented, obedient steeds to prance, jump, hop on their hind legs, and do-si-do in time to the music.

While I appreciate the elegance and grandeur of a horse show, I also love the rustic simplicity and intimacy of a sheepdog demonstration. Two of my favorites are in Ireland and Scotland.

In Ireland, I enjoy the Kissane Sheep Farm, a 2,500-acre farm perched on a scenic slope above the Black Valley near Killarney, where John Kissane’s family has been raising sheep for five generations. Visitors get to chat with the family, learn about their livelihood, and watch highly

strung sheepdogs race around according to John’s call. On my most recent visit, one of the brothers effortlessly sheared a sheep while explaining how the Irish wool industry is so bad these days, the farm survives only with the help of money generated by showing off the tradition to visiting tourists.

And at Working Sheepdogs in the Scottish Highlands, a dozen joyous border collies seem eager to show off their skills. The dogs clearly love the shepherd, Neil, who they follow like a messiah. The last time I was there, Neil sat my group down in a natural little amphitheater in the turf to explain his work, its history, and why sheep and cows “are actually man’s best friend.” Then the dogs

got to work: With shouts and whistles, each followed individual commands and showed an impressive mastery over the sheep. On this farm, it was very clear: Sheepdogs are smart — and sheep are idiots.

The best animal shows and experiences are not only interesting and educational, but also vividly real and culturally broadening. Adding one to your travel itinerary is a fun way to gain insights into generations-old traditions and a different way of life.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Machu Picchu on bucket list for Metz

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Alexandra Metz isn’t a doctor, but “The Pitt” star and Los Angeles resident contemplated becoming one when she studied at Brown University. After graduating with a degree in human biology, she deferred med school for two years while she gave acting a shot.

“On the surface, it felt like a perfect backup plan, making my (acting) choice seem less risky,” said Metz, who plays Dr. Yolanda Garcia on the hit series. “At my core, though, I always knew I wouldn’t follow through with medicine, because I wasn’t excited by the journey. Acting moved me in an undeniable way. While I found medicine incredibly inspiring, I knew it wasn’t for me.”

This interview with Metz has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: Where do you film most of “The Pitt”?

A: The majority of the show is filmed in Los Angeles at Warner Brothers Studios in Burbank. We also spend about a week each season in Pittsburgh capturing exterior shots.

Q: Where did you shoot your first professional role?

A: In my hometown of New York City, on “Law & Order: Criminal Intent.” It was a major milestone as an actor, especially since I had the opportunity to work with Jeff Goldblum.

Q: Do you think your character, Dr. Yolanda Garcia, would make a good travel partner?



Actor Alexandra Metz said she loved her vacation in Japan and that her soul felt at home there. **SMUGMUG**

A: Absolutely. Studies show that surgeons are generally more stress-tolerant, confident and decisive — phenomenal qualities in a travel partner. I also think Garcia is very organized while still being open to new, exciting experiences. That balance of organization and spontaneity is the ideal way to travel. I also love her sense of humor. Her job has given her a great deal of perspective. Having seen life-and-death situations on such a constant basis, vacation-mode Garcia is probably exactly who I’d want to travel with.

Q: What childhood trip stands out?

A: When I was a kid, my mom and two sisters (and I) drove from New York City to Orlando to visit Disney World. What stands out most is the road trip. We passed through towns where we were sometimes treated with disdain, which was a difficult and formative experience. I also remember feeling uneasy at night when we had to choose motels. It didn’t always feel safe. It was eye-opening in many ways, and I was relieved when we got home. Still, it also made me realize how much I love road trips like the simplicity of travel and seeing new places along the way.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?

A: I truly loved Japan. My soul felt at home, almost as if I had lived there in a past life. There’s so much to appreciate about Nippon. Their respect for nature

immediately made me feel comfortable in a new place. In terms of navigating a new country, I loved how easy it was to travel between cities by train or public transportation. There’s a different pace, a level of conscientiousness that feels peaceful, harmonious. I also admire the dedication to craftsmanship. As a part-time ceramicist, I can’t wait to return.

Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?

A: Peru. I can’t wait to hike to Machu Picchu, immerse myself in Peruvian culture and experience Lima’s incredible food scene.

Q: What is your best or worst vacation memory?

A: It’s hard to choose the best, but if I had to, our trip through Oaxaca was incredibly special. I had been to Oaxaca City before and loved showing my husband around. We also traveled to the mountains in San José del Pacífico for a few nights, experienced a beautiful temazcal ceremony, then ended the trip along the coast exploring Playa Escondida and nearby beaches. It all felt magical. Even as nonbeach lovers, we were completely enchanted. As for the worst, on that same trip, my husband, who rarely gets sick, came down with a severe stomach virus that wiped him out for 30 hours. Even so, it didn’t take away from how incredible the trip was.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Hilton customer stuck in limbo over timeshare upgrade reversal

By **Christopher Elliott** | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I recently upgraded our Hilton Grand Vacations timeshare, but I really can’t afford it.

I want to return to our original agreement, which I can honor fully. I’ve contacted Hilton multiple times over several months.

Representatives have told me not to make payments while they handled the issue.

But now my account shows delinquency, and my credit score has dropped 43 points.

How can I fix this?

— *Henry Pash, Woodstock, Georgia*

A: You did the responsible thing by reaching out quickly to reverse the upgrade before you used any of the benefits. But the company’s delayed responses and conflicting instructions made the situation much worse.

When a representative tells you not to make a payment, you rely on this guidance. But unfortunately, it triggered a credit drop, which is completely unacceptable.

Before I go any further, and for the benefit of everyone reading this, let me say that you could have avoided this problem by running the numbers before you upgraded your membership, not afterward. Timeshares are easy to get into but harder (and sometimes impossible) to get out of.

You kept a detailed paper trail, which really helped your case. Every email, voicemail and call note you’ve logged is essential. This documentation is what gives you leverage when a company doesn’t follow through on its promises. In cases like these, it’s often your only protection against automated billing systems or internal miscommunication.

You also have consumer protections on your side. Under the Fair Credit Reporting Act, Hilton must promptly correct any inaccurate information on your credit report. Your account never should have remained delinquent while the upgrade reversal was unresolved. The Truth in Lending Act requires a clear disclosure of your obligations and the proper handling of payments during disputes.

And don’t forget, many states have timeshare laws that allow you to cancel or reverse an upgrade within a certain period. These statutes give you legal leverage if the company stalls or gives you conflicting advice. Unfortunately, even though you quickly requested a reversal after your purchase, you appear to have missed the state-mandated window.

Persistence is key. Keep escalating politely but firmly when local offices fail to respond. Copy higher-level executives in your emails and maintain your written record. (I publish the names, numbers and email addresses of the Hilton Grand Vacations executives on my consumer

advocacy site, [Elliott.org](http://elliott.org).) This combination of patience, assertiveness and documentation is usually what separates a successful resolution from a drawn-out mess.

I reached out to the company on your behalf. After months of back-and-forth, Hilton Grand Vacations agreed to reverse your upgrade transaction. Your account has been returned to the original time slot, and Hilton Grand Vacations has refunded your down payment of \$4,500. Best of all, your credit score is back to normal, too!

You got lucky. You requested a downgrade after your cooling-off period, but the level of ambiguity in the company’s statements gave you a strong case for a reversal. But as they say, don’t try this at home. Once you’ve made any kind of timeshare transaction, chances are, you can’t undo it this easily.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.