

The Pump Jack

I am out searching for the perfect Alberta picture, the one with an oil pump jack in the foreground, a beautiful harvested field in the near ground and mountains frosted with snow in the background. A gorgeous blue sky with a few fluffy white clouds would also be good, says Gerry Boudrias who sells my photography images through his stock agency PHOTO SEARCH Ltd. I have planned my shoot to correspond with the full moon.

I am driving my Dodge converted Van with all the comforts of home; a bed, kitchen, water, thermostat and indoor bathroom. I scout an area around Cremona and find several pump jacks situated so that the mountains are in the background. Now I need the harvest of wheat and the blues skies. Unfortunately we had snow last weekend. Farmers are sore as wet hens as they work against another forecast of rain and cold. They are trying to swath the fallen grain from last week's weather. Machines break down catching in the soft wet dirt and need repair.

The best time to photograph the snow on the mountains in southern Alberta is first thing in the morning. The early sun whitens their peaks making them leap out in their mighty tallness. I want to be in position by dawn so I head off planning to spend the night where I have scouted the perfect picture. I turn off on a secondary highway. As I meander towards my destination, I see a perfect pump jack high on a hill, right in the middle of a field where a swather is cutting wheat. It is perfect, but it is 8 PM and the farmer plods around the field in his machine. It will be perfect for morning. I'd best stay right here and get shots of the moon tonight too, with the pump jack in the foreground.

I must ask permission to stay in this field overnight. I drive to the house nearby, brave the ferocious-looking barking German Sheppard and knock on the door. A kindly work-worn woman answers and says yes, I may stay in their field, but she is concerned about me. She says that I will be much safer if I stay in their yard. Anyone might just come around the pump jack in the night, she tells me. She is slightly older than I and I can see that she is concerned for this silly city woman out in the country alone. She insists that I stay in their yard. I promise to check it out and do, finding that the mature stand of poplars surrounding the farm effectively blocks the moon. I go back, thank her for her concern and say that I much prefer the open field with the pump jack. She reluctantly lets me go if I promise to honk the horn if there is any trouble. They would come right away. I promise and with that assurance she lets me drive back to the field.

I park so that from my bed in the back of the van I can watch the moon. About 11.30pm when the moon is just in the right position, I climb out of the van with my tripod and camera and a wide angle lens. I set up carefully to photograph the pump jack in the spooky moonlight. I do it two ways, first with a slow shutter speed to make the movement blurry and then with a faster shutter speed to get everything sharp. It's perfect. I go to bed.

Towards daylight, I wake and see that the moon has set. The sky is full of dark grey heavy clouds making my ideal setup a bust. I turn on the radio. In Calgary, seventy kilometers to the south, there is sunshine. The forecast is sunshine all day. I mentally thank my hosts of the field and pump jack and set off south. Farther south the morning light is perfect. It's a great photography morning in the right place. I shoot red barns in the early sun, horses in paddocks, wheat fields, fences all with the majestic mountains white tipped, soaring in the west to top the photographs. But none have a pump jack. Sorry Gerry. The perfect Alberta shot will just have to wait till next time.



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