

'Blood and Oil' is the new 'Dallas,' but too bad the oil boom is already over

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By Debbie Carlson



The fracking boom in North Dakota didn't wake up like this. Actors Amber Valletta, left, and Don Johnson make fracking look glamorous in *Blood and Oil*.

By Debbie Carlson 2015-09-28 15:41:05 UTC

The biggest irony about Sunday night's debut of *Blood and Oil*, ABC's show about the oil boom in North Dakota, is that the boom times there are over – for now, at least.

Sure, a few years ago when crude-oil prices were over \$100 a barrel and gasoline prices were topping \$4 a gallon, people were tripping over themselves to get to the Bakken Shale region in northwestern North Dakota.

And who wouldn't rush out there when salaries were hitting \$100,000 – of course you'd have to live in the middle of nowhere and in a place where the average mid-winter temperature low is zero.

That's not the case now, as crude-oil prices are around \$45 a barrel and oil companies are hemorrhaging cash and people.

Ah, but why let the facts stand in the way of a good story?

Blood and Oil is trying to be *Dallas* for a new generation, but whether it succeeds is another question.

U.S. Route 85 between Williston and Watford City, N.D. in 2014, as oil-industry vehicles take over the former bleak, two-lane road. □

We talked to Mike Ciccarelli, commodity and stock trader at Briefing.com, to chat about what *Blood and Oil* gets right and what it missed. He was disappointed the show — a drama about a complicated, Shakespearean family — only lightly touches on the actual oil industry.

“I was hoping for a lot more color in this, a lot more about what was going on,” he said. “Maybe that will come later.”

We decided to fact-check the show's premiere with Ciccarelli. Here's what you should believe — and what you shouldn't — about the modern-day oil boom it represents.

What *Blood and Oil* gets right

Crappy, small apartments in the oil-rich parts of North Dakota cost New York-sized rents. When Cody (Rebecca Rittenhouse) tries to rent a dumpy apartment in Rock Springs (which is based on real-life Williston) she's told it's \$2,000 a month. The Associated Press reported in February 2014 the average rent was \$2,394 for a 700-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment in North Dakota, the highest in the U.S., citing Apartment Guide data. With the oil boom now more a bust, rents there are cheaper, with as seen in these Craigslist offerings, like a two-bedroom duplex for \$1,850.

Briggs Oil really does exist, sort of. Hap Briggs (Don Johnson) plays an oil baron, a man who is said to be based on Harold Hamm, chairman and chief executive officer of Continental Resources, an independent oil producer in the region. Like Don Johnson's Briggs and his supermodel wife Amber Valletta, Hamm is [no stranger to family drama](#), considering that his ex-wife won \$1 billion in their divorce — and tried to make the case that she had been cheated out of her rightful half of his fortune.



billionaire oilman Harold Hamm, chairman of Oklahoma City-based Continental Resources Inc., delivers his speech, "Rock Steady in the Bakken", during the 22nd Williston Basin Petroleum

Conference in Bismarck, N.D.

Image: Kevin Cederstrom/Associated Press

Breakneck land deals and high bidding for small parcels of land. The fracking boom in North Dakota is a black-gold rush. When so much money is at stake, bitter fighting and back door deals are pretty realistic.

What it gets wrong

North Dakota doesn't have picturesque snowy mountains. Maybe they're thinking of Idaho? Wyoming? The oil-rich areas of North Dakota have some modest foothills, but North Dakota isn't called the Northern Plains for nothing.

North Dakota has larger oil deposit than Saudi Arabia? Um, no. The size of Saudi Arabia's Ghawar field is a state secret, but is estimated to have 74 billion barrels remaining in reserves versus Bakken's 24 billion, as reported by Bloomberg. But the U.S. produces more crude oil and natural gas than Saudi Arabia.

Stealing oil. Briggs' wayward son, Wick (Scott Michael Foster), wants to steal a tanker truck of oil to make money. In the U.S., "that's something that doesn't happen," Ciccarelli said. Oil theft is more an issue in places like Nigeria.



Note the flat land: A horse grazes in an icy field with pump jacks nearby, near the oil boom city of Williston, N.D.

Image: Eric Gay/Associated Press

It's too clean. Even near the oil rig, in the rain, everything is neat. There's no air pollution, no farmland destroyed by oil spills. It's an unrealistic view of the environmental cost of oil exploration. Ciccarelli agreed. "I thought we were going to get more oily messes," he said.

What the show misses entirely

The word "fracking" is never used. The reason why that area produces so much oil is because of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling. It's a violent, dangerous process and without its proper name, viewers might not get

a true sense of how the oil is extracted — at great cost in both money and the risk to human life.

The underground explosion seen early on that causes the rig to fall is caused by pumping water, sand and chemicals at such a fast pressure to break open the rock, Ciccarelli said.

“It puts an unbelievable amount of pressure in order to blast horizontally through the rock, and it can cause blowouts like that... When Don Johnson says that falling rig was \$1 million, it probably cost more than \$1 million,” he said, adding the scene underplays the danger of working in oil fields.



Pump jacks in Williston, North Dakota. Fracking isn't a neat business.

Image: Eric Gay/Associated Press

Flaming oil spills. The last scene has a small oil spill catching on fire immediately. While oil definitely burns and Bakken's light, sweet crude is more flammable than heavier – i.e. less pure – crude oil, the immediate ignition of that spill was more characteristic of gasoline.

The dark side of the oil boom. As the population of the oil-rich parts of North Dakota swelled, it brought plenty of ills with it, such as sex trafficking, a sharp rise in drug use and violence that comes with unchecked growth.

Of course, there's plenty of artistic license that a show can take, but no one watching *Blood and Oil* should pack up for North Dakota just yet. There's a long way to go.