

Balmorhea pool is closing ag

Fracking boom boosts town's fortunes, but concerns linger

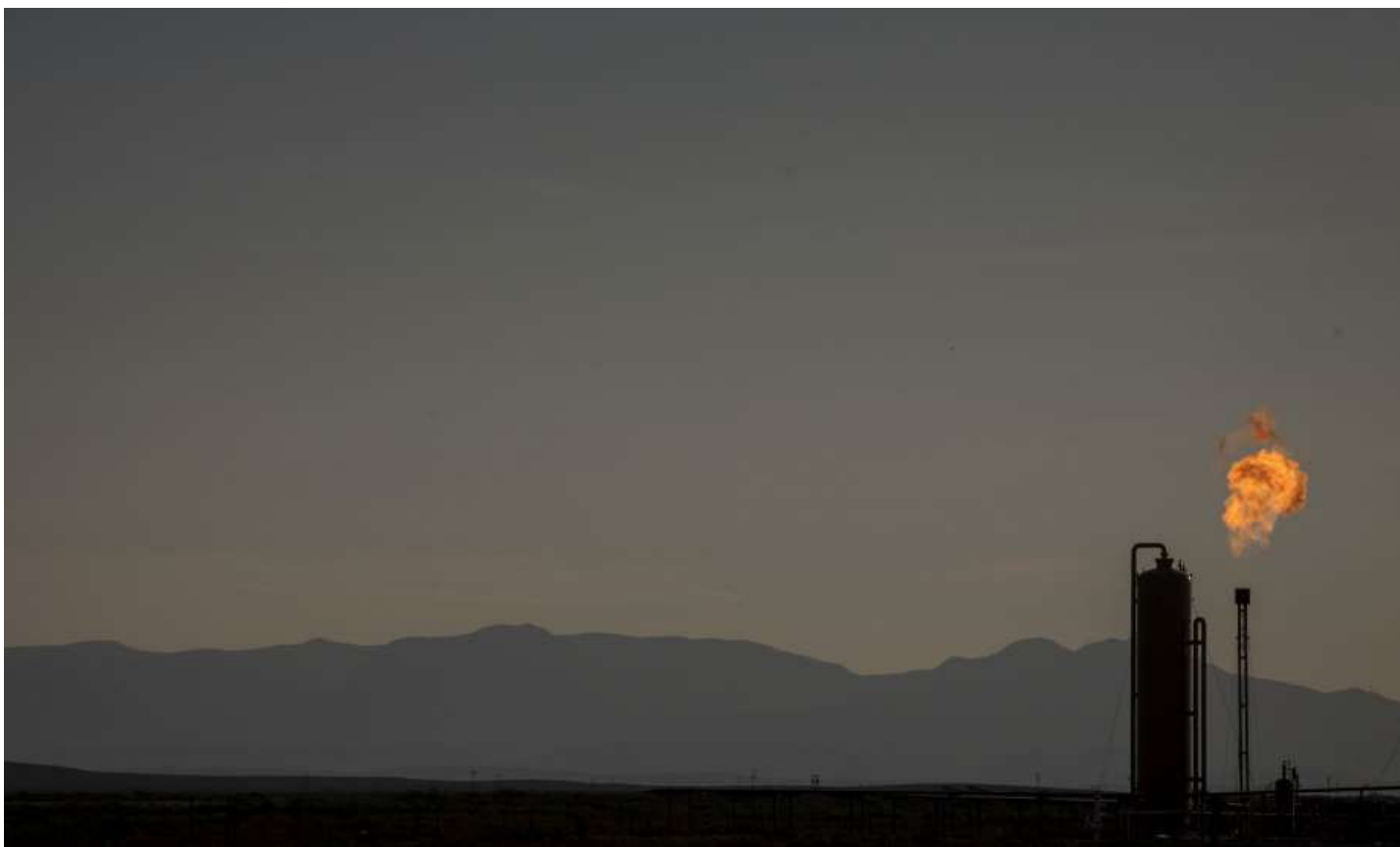
By Emily Foxhall
Photography by Jon Shap

Published Aug. 29, 2016

BALMORHEA — Day by day, visitors flock to the sparkling, spring-fed Balmorhea pool in the Chihuahuan desert. They come by the hundreds, buying tickets ahead, packing food for the day.

Four miles separate the attraction from the city of Balmorhea, population 479. The historic swimming hole helped make the town known. Residents relied on it for tourism.

But the economy is changing. And the closing of the pool for a third round of repairs after Labor



A flare burns near Balmorhea, part of the Permian's Delaware Basin.

Many agree Balmorhea needed the economic boost fracking brought. But no one wants to see damage — maybe from water contamination or earthquakes — to the destination that makes their community distinct.

Fracking has **overhauled the character of nearby cities**, such as Pecos, 40 miles north, where workers swarm for new jobs, roads fill with dangerous truck traffic and infrastructure marks the once desolate landscape.

Balmorhea residents watched that happen, fearing added risk to their famous pool. Though the oil and gas company operating there has promised to stay away from it, at least one activist group has argued the springs are at risk.

Balmorhea calls itself the “Oasis of West Texas,” a place where cottonwoods thrive and a canal fed



There are 29 registered RV parks in Balmorhea. Ten spaces sit behind City Hall.

The industry growth is already changing the town, drawing so many workers that recreational vehicles appear all over, including behind City Hall, and workers occupy rooms in the three small motels.

At Balmorhea State Park, which includes the pool, Superintendent Carolyn Rose said she could not fill three open jobs.

The park, meanwhile, recorded 316,859 combined visits in the 2016 and 2017 fiscal years. "This is a destination for so many people," Rose said.

WorryResidents fear fracking could destroy natural springs



Jeff Nabors, 31, holds 4-year-old Piper, who jumped into the pool from the diving board.



Piper paused, then leaped into the pool, emerging with a shriek and a smile.

Change came fast. In the fall of 2016, Houston-based Apache Corp. **announced the discovery of Alpine High**, which covers an area roughly 65 by 18 miles, including the pool and tiny Balmorhea near the middle. The company believes the field holds more than 3 billion barrels of oil.

Residents **were conflicted over Apache's arrival. They suspected fracking when**, during the annual cleaning in May 2018, the concrete under the pool's diving board collapsed.

People struggled to see how oil and gas production would benefit them, said Ellen Weinacht, a member of Apache's community advisory committee.



Balmorhea Public Library is run independently from the city.



The books are shelved in an old community club building.

Weinacht's thinking was: There's a gold mine in the ground. How can we make the most of it?

Increased sales tax money boosted the city budget. Combined market value of property in the school district nearly doubled.

A Texas Seismological Network sensor installed in September 2017 detected three sets of mild earthquakes miles from the park.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department determined erosion caused the pool damage. Apache still **donated \$1 million for the 10-month fix** and **\$1 million more for a pool endowment**.



Oil and gas structures sit near an abandoned barn near Balmorhea.

The company **promised not to drill under the town or pool** and for three years has paid University of Texas at Arlington researchers to **track groundwater quality**.

“They listened to the people,” Reeves County Commissioner Paul Hinojos said.

At the root of the conflict, perhaps, is trust. Will Apache leaders do as they say? Is it possible for this all to exist without changing the heart of Balmorhea?



Advocate Sharon Wilson criticized Apache Corp. for altering the landscape around Balморhea, "a crown jewel of Texas," she said. "I think it's extremely arrogant and greedy."

Sharon Wilson, a senior organizer with Washington, D.C.-based Earthworks, says Apache's best efforts aren't good enough. In a 2016 report, the [group argued that the springs faced various risks](#).

"Their best is still really horrifying," she said, describing what she sees as dangerous emissions and irresponsible wastewater disposal.

An Apache spokesman, Phil West, said Wilson's characterizations were incorrect. The company regularly monitors emissions to ensure safety and compliance, he said, and is recycling over 85 percent of produced water in its fracking operations in the area "which dramatically reduces the need for disposal."

Pat Brijalba, a city alderman, considered the topic as he sat on a bench by the spring-fed ditch. Workers bought breakfast burritos at Balморhea Grocery across the street.



Alderman Pat Brijalba poses outside his home in Balморhea, where he moved in sixth grade from across the street.

ChangeApache, oil drilling, become part of life in Balморhea

The spunky city looked worn. Brijalba, 70, felt worn, too. A one-man chamber of commerce, as he calls himself, he runs Oasis Snow Cones and brainstorms how to promote his hometown.

Income from RV spaces has helped him. Water in the canal gurgled out to farmers.

“We don’t want to lose anything,” Brijalba said.

“It’s our livelihood,” said Abel Baeza, manager of Reeves County Water Improvement District 1.



Civilian Conservation Corps workers built the Balmorhea pool in the 1930's. Many were nearby residents.

Repairs to the Depression-era pool took extra time because city leaders wanted to preserve its historic structure. It **re-opened March 1, 2019**, then closed again for several weeks around the May cleaning because of trouble with a drain gate.

Visitors, meanwhile, were coming in droves.

The parks department this year created an online reservation system, capping daily visitors at 900. People used to wait so long that they started grilling while parked off Texas 17.

To Edith Peña, the pool felt more peaceful and quiet when she was growing up. She is now a park customer service representative and wonders if social media gave away the secret.



Ivy Freeland, 25, tries to bring the kids she nannies to Balморhea often, including Peyton Kinkade, 11, far left, and Joshua Kinkade, 2.

It gets so crowded that those such as Ivy Freeland, 25, who lives 60 miles away in Alpine, can't swing by whenever they like. Freeland grew up going to the pool. For the July 4 weekend, she couldn't get tickets.

She felt glad for people to see this special place, but she missed the calmer years.

"We want to share it because it's amazing," she said. "You just kind of have to pick and choose when you come."

On an overcast Tuesday in late July, Freeland swam in the chilly water with kids she nannies. The Blancarte family from 90 miles northeast in Kermit took a break to eat hot dogs.



Jeff Nabors, 31, jumps off the diving board at Balморhea. He said they tried to stay in town but everything was booked.

Other visitors flipped from the diving board, landing among the fish.

“It’s real peaceful out here,” said Rosemary Iniquez, lead park ranger. “It’s just a wonderful place.”

David and Karen Smith loved the pool so much they moved to Balморhea. They bought the Eleven Inn, where they used to stay. Rather than rent all their rooms to oil workers, they reserve some for tourists.

That afternoon, they watered their landscaping from the ditch before swimming. Their brochure lists the pool as the first thing to do.



"It's a real personal commitment," said David Smith, of running the Eleven Inn with his wife.

"It seems mundane because it's sitting there all the time, but who else has one of those?" said David, 68. "It's a real wonder of the world."

From Sept. 3 until March 1, the pool and park are set to be closed for the septic system to be replaced. Another point of local consternation: The motel and campground have been under renovation since 2017.



Finding a spot for his trailer in Balmorhea was like finding a needle in a haystack, worker Joel Pepperday said.

The pool offered consistency for local business, said Joel Pepperday, a 38-year-old Clear Lake native, who came to Balmorhea for a job in oil and gas and bartends part-time at Jo's Bar & Grill.

“The pool is one of those things that draw people here,” Pepperday said, “and so when the pool isn't open, it really does affect the town.”



"This is my little rock shop," said Suzanne Franklin, 68, whose store is off Main St. in town.

Suzanne Franklin, 68, who owns Balmorhea Rock Shop, saw a decline in business the last time it shuttered. She already finds fewer pool-goers venture in with the new reservation system.

Oil workers buy gifts, but the industry caused her trouble. Wells built around where she lived north of Balmorhea, she said, made her nose bleed and chest tight.



Suzanne Franklin shows a necklace made by her late husband, made with Deer Creek Fire Agate.

“We want nothing to do with it,” Franklin said.

She sold the land and mineral rights.

Balmorehea State Park is scheduled to close Sept. 3, 2019, and reopen March 1, 2020.

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Conversation(54)



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ZAW ★ Leader · 29 Aug

The headline made it sound like the fracking was causing the pool to close. That's not the ca

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Sam58 ★ Leader · 29 Aug → ZAW

Yes it is. There have been earthquakes since fracking and they never happened in the are bef
The bedrock is cracked, therefore the pool itself is cracked and there has been pollution introduced i
Oil companies have always put profits over the environment, well, over anything. Now with the full b
a byproduct of the industr

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NorthAmericar ★ Leader · 30 Aug

"Residents were conflicted over Apache's arrival. They suspected fracking when, during the annual cleaning
under the diving board to collapse does not understand cause and effect. Too bad, but repeating this nons

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JOHN883 ★ Leader · 29 Aug · Edited

This is perhaps one of the most wonderfully well written propaganda pieces I've reaHouston's Home Town F
sentence here~n~there about the evil capitalist oil corporations and their greed intent on destroying this un
feature writer, maybe thNYT, PBS or Pravda itself one day? The future is bright for a propagandist of this qu

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Bobski_ ★ Leader · 29 Aug → JOHN883

I don't see where you're finding all that, but that area is in the middle of a huge oil boom. A lot of pec
few years ago are right in the middle of it all, and they're having to scramble to accommodate all the
because a lot of people--either directly or indirectly--now have the opportunity to make some really g
unprecedented, and nobody's quite figured out how to handle. However, those communities are slo
come down. Oil booms eventually become oil busts. It's not a matter of good or evil, but it's still sad t

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DAVID777 ★ Leader · 30 Aug

"They suspected fracking when, during the annual cleaning in May 2018, the concrete under the pool's divin

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SUSAN536 ★ Influencer · 29 Aug · Edited

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I agree with the comment that the article subtitle is misleading. The independent seismic monitor has detected the article. What is "miles away"? Apache has said they will not drill under the town. They need a permit for expect opponents are keeping watch on the drilling permits for the area and should know pretty quick if a w disposal wells proposed by others in proximity to the town and pool. That opposition is somewhat unprece

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ROBERT1445 · 29 Aug



Exactly what the reporters wanted you to thir

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StanleyOliver · 3 Sep



Very disturbing to see how the energy industry has changed the natural desert landscape between Pecos ar

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JSM · 29 Aug

My father grew up in Balmorhea and left as soon as he could get out to joined the military at age 16.. It was ever seen. Made me very depressed to see it. I am happy the Alpine High is providing jobs and helping the e

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amariepoet ★ Leader · 29 Aug

Does anyone remember Rex Tillerson pitching a fit a few years ago when there was going to be a fracking w ground water

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Elmatthehelr · 29 Aug → amariepoet

It was wind farm, not an oil and gas wel

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