

Leaks: Future Legacy Of Abandoned Wells?

Story by Rex Graham

Photo by Neil Jacobs

Fire Hazard

ABOUT 4:30 P.M. Saturday, Dec. 19, an off duty oilfield worker spotted white steam billowing from a natural gas well next to Worley Baseball Park on the city's north side.

Within minutes two city fire trucks were at the scene near 30th and Dustin, and a group of onlookers gathered as the well caught fire, the men were instructed to use their water hoses to keep flames from igniting a nearby pair of large oil holding tanks.

A 16-inch high pressure gas pipeline, the Blanco-Fruitland line, lay almost directly beneath the rubber-suited men,

the city limits.

El Paso Natural Gas Co. officials contacted after the Dec. 19 incident said the overheating malfunction is common, and should not be viewed as a public safety threat — as long as the wells are left alone.

Chief Connors said the department responded to the December incident as "a worst-possible-case." The Daily Times learned that the department quickly contacted Helmer Corp. in Durango, Colo., owner of the well, to tell of concern that the well might catch fire. But it was El Paso's assignment

Regulatory Gap

A Gas Company of New Mexico leak detection truck was slowly making its way down Camino Rio Nov. 16, when instruments detected a high concentration of methane gas.

LEVELS OF THE COLORLESS, odorless gas were high at two houses: officials feared a match or pilot light could touch off an explosion, and the Harold Roberts family, 2113 Camino Rio, was evacuated. They spent the holidays at a Farmington motel.

Retired Farmington school teacher, Mrs. Guinevere H. "Winnie" Brady, owner of the other house with high methane levels, was vacationing and said recently she has stayed with friends since returning to the city.

Neither family has been allowed back in their home and Mrs. Brady said she suffered a heart attack in January.

AFTER INVESTIGATING, the district superintendent for the state Oil Conservation Division said a buried gas well, abandoned in 1955, was found to be the source of the gas.

Frank Chavez said several errors in 1955 resulted in the problem:

—The actual location of the well is 400 to 500 feet from where an old survey indicated it was.

—The well was never capped, as required to release the owner from the \$5,000 to \$50,000 plugging bond.

—An iron pipe required to mark the location of the site was somehow buried. The original owner of the well, A.H. Bernstein, is dead.

Gas Company officials and lawyers involved in the case would not comment on who is financially liable to the displaced families for the incident.

"Fault will be up to the court to decide," Chavez said.

But the eventual court decision apparently will not end the problem.

"There are old gas wells all over out there," said city planner Joe Schmitz. "Unfortunately the records on them aren't very good."

"WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING at our records," Chavez noted, "and there have been wells drilled in areas where

before completing a well inside the city limits, and the city is keeping better track of them.

The city has also tried to make gas wells safer by requiring that oil and gas wells be no closer than 100 feet from any structure. Another ordinance mandates that "All tanks used for the storage of condensate, crude oil or other liquids produced by and in conjunction with any oil or gas well be buried."

BUT THE ORDINANCE applies only to new wells — older wells, including the 32 currently in operation, are exempt.

City fire crews responded Dec. 19 to a report of steam billowing from a gas well at the corner of 30th Street and Dustin Avenue. The oil holding tanks, about 50-feet from the steam, were not buried and firemen were instructed to spray water on them if a fire broke out.

The overheated El Paso Natural Gas Co. equipment was repaired and no fire occurred. Jack Erwin, a field superintendent with El Paso, said the malfunction was routine, and did not pose a safety problem.

The Dec. 19 incident caused added concern because a high pressure 16-inch gas line, the Blanco-Fruitland line, is located adjacent to the well.

"THERE IS ALWAYS A POTENTIAL for hazard," said Farmington City Manager Bill Manchester, "but more than the wells, there is a potential for a fire disaster from the high-pressure lines."

Three such lines run east-west across the northern sections of the city: a 16-inch line parallel to 30th Street and a pair of lines 10 blocks north — one 16-inch, the other 20-inch.

Those pipelines are fed by hundreds of county gas wells, 32 within the city limits, according to a map prepared by the city Planning Department in cooperation with El Paso Natural Gas Co. Three more wells were approved for drilling by the city council.

Manchester said the city offers a

right, but the alarm raised the question of what, if any, safety problems Farmington's cohabitation with the natural gas industry poses.

Farmington and several other New Mexico towns, including Aztec, Bloomfield, Carlsbad, Eunice, Fruitland, Kirtland, Hobbs, Shiprock, Jal and several smaller communities are peppered with over 100 gas wells and laced with networks of interconnecting pipelines, said an official with the Oil Conservation Division.

Farmington alone has 32 existing gas wells, plus three more proposed with in

revent the problem.

"THERE WASN'T ANYTHING to catch fire there," said El Paso field superintendent Jack Erwin. "There's no danger there as long as everybody stays away from it."

Conners also said later that the situation wasn't that serious: "We used that to exercise the boys a little bit."

"A gas line is a very safe means of transporting energy products," Chief Conners said. "We don't want to cry 'wolf' when they don't cause many problems. When they do, they aren't that bad."

communities around the state are peppered with gas and oil wells, and are laced with networks of underground pipelines.

The OCD's Chavez said city ordinances regulating gas wells and pipelines vary, and small, unincorporated towns generally have no ordinances.

Chavez said oil and gas drilling in Bloomfield and Aztec was more intensive than in Farmington, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. He noted that 10 Bloomfield wells were capped in the last four years.

