

Well, Well, Mineral Wells!

Everything old is new again in this Palo Pinto County burg

Written by Gene Fowler.



A simple postcard inspired me to embark on an unexpected journey. In the early 1980s, I chanced upon a colorful postcard of A Mineral Wells' Crazy Water Hotel, depicted in its 1930s heyday. Curious about the town's history, I did some research. It wasn't long before I had developed a healthy obsession with Texas' once-booming spa towns, where celebrities and common folks alike gathered to "take the waters." The ritual of quaffing and immersing one's mortal vessel in heavily-mineralized water was regarded up to the 1940s and '50s as nature's remedy for conditions ranging from sluggishness to insanity. The Palo Pinto County town of Mineral Wells, in particular, became known as the happy spot "Where America Drinks Its Way to Health," due to the high mineral content of its water, some zesty promotional campaigns, a picturesque setting in a valley of small hills, and several elegant resort hotels.

Some 10 years after I found the post-card, Texas Christian University Press published my book *Crazy Water—the Story of Mineral Wells and Other Texas Health Resorts*. The book's 20th anniversary seemed a good time to revisit the town once billed as "The South's Great Health and Pleasure Resort" and "The Convention City of Texas."



You can visit the Famous Mineral Water Company for a free sample of Crazy Water.

The potential restoration of the Baker Hotel—which closed in the early 1970s and now looms over the small town like a romantic, colossal ruin—is the biggest news. Built in 1929 in an opulent style described by Palo Pinto County historian John Winters as “Spanish Colonial Revival, Commercial Highrise,” the 14-story, 450-room hotel offered a grand ballroom, a gymnasium, a lavish swimming pool and spa, and a rooftop garden and dance floor. Despite the Great Depression, a massive advertising campaign during the 1930s and 1940s kept the health-and-glamour resort filled with movie stars, politicians, oil tycoons, and “regular” folks.

On past tours of the hotel’s interior, I’ve imagined former guests like actress Marlene Dietrich sipping mineral water in the 18,500-square-foot “drinking pavilion,” heavyweight champ Jack Dempsey soaking his wounds in the medically supervised bathing facilities, and Clark Gable knocking down pins in the bowling alley. In the haunting, faded glamour of the once-grand ballroom, I’ve envisioned my late father on the bandstand, where he often stood in life, leading his dance orchestra as elegant revelers drifted across the floor.

The Baker has changed hands several times since it closed, with each new owner announcing elaborate restoration plans. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, and four years later, a group of Georgia investors attempt-ed to turn the hotel into a Texas-history theme park, with plans for each floor to represent a different era of the state’s past. That plan never materialized, but the current group of developers is taking a more realistic approach. Chad Patton, a member of the Baker Development Team with Bernstein Global Wealth Management, details a \$55 million financial arrangement involving city tax-increment financing districts, Section 108 HUD loans, and other elements. “We still need to find a guarantor for the \$25 million HUD loan,” he tells me, “but we’ve been in talks with several key investment groups and we’re very optimistic.”



An easygoing, health-conscious vibe permeates the Brazos Market and Bistro, where the menu changes daily.

Jeff Trigger with La Corsha Hospitality—the Austin firm that rejuvenated the Stoneleigh and Adolphus hotels in Dallas, the Driskill in Austin, and the St. Anthony in San Antonio—plans to guide the hotel’s operations. “We hope to make the Baker a four-star destination resort,” says Trigger. “Much of the revenue stream will come from special events, meetings, and weddings—but we also want to bring back the spa tradition, with mineral water baths indoors and out.”

Austin filmmaker and Mineral Wells native Kevin Pruitt is documenting the hotel’s history and potential restoration in a forthcoming movie called *Ballad of the Baker*. “The interest and excitement people have shown about the hotel is incredible,” says Pruitt. “Nearly 8,000 people ‘like’ the Baker on Facebook. Everyone has a story, and I want to keep those stories alive. With restoration comes rebirth—not just for the hotel, but for the town and for the county.”

Until the storied hotel reopens, you can admire menus, brochures, postcards, and other Baker artifacts at the Famous Mineral Water Company. While there, belly up to the antique bar and sample the town’s original Crazy Water. Named for its alleged cure of a mentally unstable woman in the 1880s, the water served at the Famous Mineral Water Company is delivered in four different strengths of mineral content.

Just south of the old Crazy Water Hotel (now a retirement home) on Oak Street, the eclectic Witschorke’s Antiques and Collectables displays and sells vintage brochures, postcards, pictures, bottles, laundry bags, and other Baker Hotel memorabilia. Across the street from Witschorke’s, the year-old Brazos Market and Bistro upholds local tradition by stocking Crazy Water and Eventide, a springwater bottled in adjacent Parker County. “The menu for our health-conscious lunches changes daily,” says proprietor Susan Wallace, “and we make our food fresh every morning.” The day I had lunch at the bistro, the chicken-and-artichoke casserole and the tomato-basil soup were delicious. “The cowboy casserole is also very popular,” adds Wallace. “It’s a blend of lean beef and turkey with hominy, green chiles, and fire-roasted tomatoes.”

The market features Texas products like Javataza coffee, from a company that imports beans from Costa Rica and roasts them at its Grandview headquarters; loose-leaf teas from Zhi Tea Company in Austin; and chocolates from Hico and Fredericksburg.

While Wallace describes the bistro's ambiance as a blend of retro and modern, another recently opened local attraction offers something really old, like 300 million years old: Mineral Wells Fossil Park.

Located west of town in the former borrow pit for an old city dump, the fossil park offers a seemingly endless supply of fossilized marine life from the Pennsylvanian Age. According to the park website, visitors can find crinoids, echinoids, brachiopods, pelecypods, bryozoa, corals, trilobites, and even primitive sharks' teeth. You don't even have to dig—the fossils are right on the ground.

“The amazing thing about Mineral Wells Fossil Park,” says Dallas Paleontological Society member Lee Higginbotham, “is that you can actually keep what you find.” The society was instrumental in convincing the city to establish the park last year and kicked in \$7,000 to help prepare the site for visitors. “We think this is the best way to get kids interested in science,” adds Higginbotham. “At the fossil park, every kid finds something from the floor of the ocean that covered Texas 300 million years ago and they get to pick it up and take it home!”

If I'm lucky enough to still be on the planet in 20 years, I look forward to re-visiting the fossil park, checking into the Baker Hotel, and raising a glass of Crazy Water to toast the successful melding of history and progress—and to one of the most interesting towns in Texas. As it says on lamppost banners throughout downtown, “Keep Mineral Wells Crazy!”

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From the May 2011 issue.