A Texas Rebel's Fight for Her Land

HOW A DOWN-ON-HER-LUCK SINGLE MOTHER IN A RAMSHACKLE TRAILER REINVENTED HERSELF AS THE **BRIGHT, BOLD, UNAPOLOGETICALLY OUTRAGEOUS VOICE** OF THE **ANTIFRACKING MOVEMENT**

BY **SUZANNA ANDREWS**
PHOTOGRAPHED BY **DAN WINTERS**

BLIPP THIS PAGE
to watch Sharon Wilson throw down the gauntlet at a Stop the Frack Attack rally.

Sharon

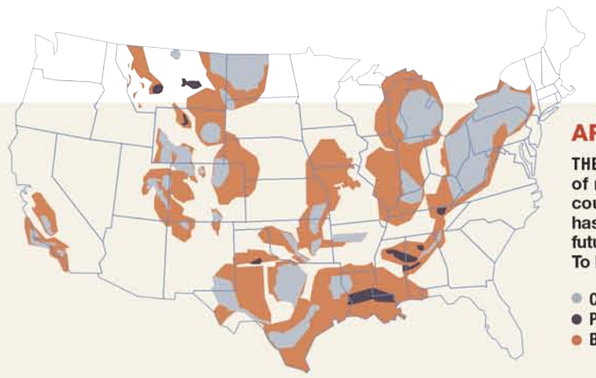
WILSON IS SLOUCHED in a comfortably worn brown leather armchair in the cozy, light-filled living room of her home in Allen, Texas, a prosperous suburb of Dallas. Dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, she is checking the hundreds of e-mails, texts and voice mails that have come in throughout the day from some of the many people who seek her advice—a roster that includes lawyers, environmentalists and newspaper reporters from around the country. On the mantel opposite her sits a photograph. Simply framed, it shows a beautiful woman, her face buoyed by clouds of fluffy blonde hair, staring at the camera through eyes that look just this side of awake. She wears a peasant blouse and a small, pillowy pout. There is a shadow of physical resemblance to the Sharon Wilson of today—the high cheekbones, the watchful, catlike green eyes and the blonde hair, although it is shorter now, and faded—but in attitude and demeanor the woman in the armchair seems very different. "*That*," she says of the photograph, "was another life."

During that life, which ended not so long ago, Wilson was living in a remote, dilapidated trailer with spotty electricity and a cracked tub that leaked all over the bathroom floor. A single mother facing a mountain of bills, she felt helpless and, she says, "almost out of hope." Then, in 2008, an energy company paid her a $20,000 signing bonus and promised $1,200 a month in royalties for the right to "frack" natural gas under her property. "I actually *begged* them to drill my land," she says, widening her eyes as if still in disbelief at the distance she has traveled. Now, five years after making that deal, Wilson is one of the country's most outspoken critics of the oil and gas industry, and she has galvanized opposition to what many consider either the most promising or the most dangerous method of energy extraction today.

One of the most contentious issues in the nation, hydraulic fracturing—the process of injecting fluids deep into the ground at high pressure in order to break up the shale to release the natural gas within—has divided families and pitted neighbor against neighbor. According to the oil and gas industry and the scientists, politicians and environmentalists who support it, fracking is a safe drilling process that represents energy independence, a boom in jobs and tax revenues and a cleaner alternative to coal and oil. On the opposite side is a different set of scientists, politicians and environmentalists, who say the benefits of fracking have been exaggerated and who are concerned about the possible environmental and health risks of this drilling process. The battle, says New York real estate and environmental lawyer Elisabeth Radow, has created an army of "citizen activists"—ordinary Americans from Texas and California to Colorado and Arkansas to New York and Pennsylvania who feel that their lives and communities are being threatened by fracking. At 60, Sharon Wilson is a leader of that army. Based in north Texas—the heart of oil and gas land and fracking's ground zero—she was one of the first to sound an alarm about the possible dangers. "She's a pioneer," says Radow.

Tough, blunt and witty, Wilson is the force behind Bluedaze.com, an award-winning antifracking site that has become a top source of news and data for the movement. An investigator, advocate, instigator and grassroots organizer, Wilson—aka TXsharon, her nom de blog—has been praised by one supporter for "shining the light of truth where it's needed." She has also won admiration for some of her more dramatic tactics. At an energy-industry convention, for example, she recorded executives as they talked about using military "psyops," or psychological-operations expertise, against members of the media, environmentalists and community opponents of fracking. Then she published the audiotapes on her blog: GASHOLES CAUGHT WITH THEIR FRACKING PANTS DOWN read her headline.

The fracking industry and its supporters are not amused. Wilson has had her records subpoenaed and has been deposed by one energy company. She's been called a Communist, a crackpot, a lunatic, a liar and "a hypocrite, because I leased my mineral rights and I still get royalty checks from the gas company," she says with a smile that is defiant but also a little hesitant around the edges. There is a part of Wilson that is uncomfortable with the life she now leads. The sleek, manicured lawns and stately redbrick homes of her upscale neighborhood—where her weather-beaten garden fence, front-yard rain barrel and solar panels raise eyebrows—contrast sharply with the life she once led. At times she feels as though she doesn't "fit in anywhere," almost like a stateless person. As Wilson is the first to admit, she is not always as tough as she looks, acting, she says, "from fear as often as I do from courage." Still, most of what propels her now is anger—at what people have suffered, at the trampling of their land and health and the environment by powerful corporations that she believes have tried to suppress the truth about fracking in order to reap big profits. "I became angry and loud," she says. "I wasn't always that way."



ARE YOU ON THE FRACK TRACK?

THE RUSH IS ON to mine the estimated 750 trillion cubic feet of natural gas locked in basins (depressions) throughout the country. Thanks to hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," drilling has proliferated over the past decade. Here are the current—and future—shale gas and oil "plays" in the continental United States. To learn more about activity in your area, go to eia.gov/state.

- **Current shale plays**
- **Prospective shale plays**
- **Basins**

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, based on data from various published studies.

HAIR AND MAKEUP: VERONICA MARTINEZ. MAP DRAWN BY OUR DESIGNS

Dreaming of easy money

BORN AND RAISED in Fort Worth, Wilson was the only daughter of a single mother, a staunchly conservative and religious woman who brought up her three children "on a secretary's salary," she says. Her father left the family when she was two, and she never saw him again. "We were very, very poor," she says. "I was teased for wearing hand-me-downs and for not having a father." She spent weekends and vacations at her maternal grandparents' ranch south of Fort Worth, where the only friends she recalls were her horses, a dog, cats and the wildlife she rescued. Her grandfather, a retired police detective, taught her to ride, work a tractor, haul hay, rope cattle and shoot.

Wilson married at 19. It was what her mother expected of her, she says, and the union lasted less than a year; she was married again by the time she turned 26. She dreamed of going to college but took only one class, a business course at Texas Christian University, before dropping out because she was pregnant with her first child, Frank, now 30. By 1985 her second marriage had ended, and Wilson found work as a secretary for Champlin Petroleum. Like many other Texans, she says, she grew up wanting a career in the lucrative oil and gas industry. After Champlin, Wilson worked for a firm that helped energy companies boost their production revenues. She started as a secretary and rose through the ranks, taking on more analytical work and heftier pay. But she quit in late 1995, bored and burned out by the corporate routine.

Wilson had long dreamed of owning land, a place where she could keep her beloved horses instead of boarding them. In 1996, with money she had carefully saved, she bought 42 acres in Wise County. The property was situated north of Fort Worth, on the edge of the magnificent Caddo-LBJ National Grasslands—so "soothing and beautiful in the summers," she says, that "when there's a wind, it looks like a golden ocean." Wilson was in a new relationship by then; in 1995 she'd given birth to her second son, Adam. Her life seemed to have settled into something close to perfection. There were turkeys and owls in the woods that surrounded her trailer, and deer in her front pasture. "I couldn't see another porch light at night, nothing," she says. But Adam's father left in 2002, and Wilson was once again on her own. She went on to hold a series of dead-end jobs that she refers to as "soul destroying" but that gave her skills—in graphic design, computers, teaching, office administration—that would later make her effective as an activist.

It was in 2003 that Wilson says she first saw neighbors coming home with brand-new "fully loaded Dodge diesels" and the highest-quality "7X beaver hats," suddenly taking expensive vacations and remodeling their homes. They had leased their mineral rights to the oil and gas operators who had recently discovered that marrying two technologies—hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling—could release the huge amounts of gas packed in the rock layers deep under the Barnett Shale. It was the birth of modern-day fracking.

When Wilson bought her property, the seller's price did not include its mineral rights. So she scraped together every extra cent she had and purchased 50 percent of those rights, just in case an energy company someday wanted to drill. With the new explosion of fracking in the area, she was determined to lease the rights and reap the rewards. "I thought, OK, how am I going to get the most money for this?" she recalls. "I wanted to be Jed Clampett. I even wrote a couple of [energy] producers and said, 'Come drill on my property.' That's how much I didn't know."

It is a morning in late March 2013, and the huge Texas sky, thick with clouds, is the color of dirty dishwater. Wilson is at the wheel of her tiny 33-miles-per-gallon Honda Fit—she gave up her pickup with gun rack several years ago—driving along country roads near the land she once owned. We pass miles of woodland and pastures, where cattle and sheep graze. Everything seems so peaceful, even with the gas wells dotting the landscape around us. And then we come to the dead zone: a brown wound, some 500 feet square, in the grasslands Wilson loved. The scar was burned into the ground around 2008 when, Wilson says, a trucker dumped his load of frack waste there. Five years later, Wilson still tears up when she sees it. About a mile away, we stop at an old well pad, one of the first drill sites in her area. It is just off the road, near a stream. The scene is bucolic except for the grinding and whirring of the gas compressor, which is so loud that I can't hear Wilson unless she shouts, even though I am sitting right next to her. »

HOW FRACKING AFFECTS YOU

CAN IT make you rich? Can it make you sick? Does it cause earthquakes? For answers to these and other questions, go to more.com/fracking. (After a frack-site visit, Wilson, above, suffered health problems, so a friend gave her this gas mask.)

Wilson says her awakening happened slowly. When she began exploring how to get the best deal for her mineral rights, she came across a website for Earthworks, an environmental group based in Washington, D.C., that was one of the first to track the early results of fracking. "I didn't read it at first," she says. "I didn't want to read bad news." Meanwhile, the drilling began near Wilson's land. "I remember one day driving home and there was gray slimy stuff oozing down the road and into the creek," she says. But she wasn't sure what had caused it.

By around 2005, after she had written several companies in the hope of leasing her mineral rights, Wilson began to pay closer attention. "I started reading a little about the pits"—the ponds at drill sites where fracking wastewater is temporarily stored—"and all of a sudden I realized, Oh. My. God. They're *here*." She'd seen the pits as she drove around near her home but hadn't realized what they were. Nor had she been aware of the toxic chemicals they could contain, including hydrochloric acid and benzene. Wilson called the Railroad Commission of Texas (RRC), the regulator in charge of ensuring that the state's groundwater is protected from oil and gas industry activities, demanding that it clean up the pits. She says the RRC told her it didn't know where the pits were. She was shocked. It was her first brush with how loosely regulated fracking was. Many states lacked the resources to closely monitor the drilling boom. But pro-business Texas was also perceived as reluctant to police an industry that was very generous with its political contributions—a reason that in 2010 the RRC, which was described by state representative Lon Burnham as "probably the most corrupt agency in the state of Texas," was faulted by a state oversight commission. "Everyone," Wilson says with one of her hallmark rhetorical flourishes, "knows the state of Texas is captured."

There was no single event that led Wilson to start fighting; rather, she says, it was "many moments upon moments." One of the most important, she recalls, happened with the simple act of turning on her tap. First, nothing came out. Then the water ran "black and slimy," and after that "gray and very sandy," before clearing up about two weeks later. Today she says she could never prove that the fracking around her property had caused her water problem, but she began to spend every spare moment researching the procedure and contacting experts.

Wilson, who blogged occasionally, began posting about well leaks, air contamination and health problems suffered by people who lived near fracking sites. Her blog was becoming frack central, a place where others could turn to have their questions answered.

Over the next few years Wilson's property was surrounded by drilling. "There were trucks tearing up the roads," she says. "Lights lit up the sky at night like Vegas," and there were days "when my whole sky turned black." Life became increasingly unbearable; at times, she recalls, "I would get in the closet and shut the door so my son couldn't hear me cry." Wilson had become such a staunch opponent of fracking by then that she no longer wanted to lease her mineral rights. But she says she had little choice. An energy company, Braden Exploration, was buying up local mineral rights, and the family who owned the other half of the rights on her land had leased theirs.

As it was, when Wilson leased her rights in October 2008, she hired a lawyer and, according to Braden's president, G. Christopher Veeder, negotiated terms that were "significantly more favorable to [her] than the terms negotiated with most of the other owners in the area." These included a "no drill" clause, which allowed the company to drill horizontally *under* her land but prohibited it from putting rigs on her 42-acre property. She also negotiated a $20,000 signing bonus and royalties of 20 percent, which began at $1,200 and today amount to payments to Wilson of about $800 a month.

On the edge of a volcano

WILSON HAS BEEN ACCUSED of hypocrisy for taking money from an industry she assails. But she doesn't see it that way. "What? I'm taking money when I didn't have much choice, so I'm supposed to shut up and let the industry trample people? I think I have *more* responsibility to speak out about their abuses, because I am involved in a business relationship" with them, she says. "As long as they are harming the environment and people, I will continue to come after them, and I will use their money to do it."

It is a view of fracking that Braden and the rest of the industry, along with other supporters of the process, dispute. Echoing most industry leaders, Braden's Veeder says oil and gas drilling is "highly regulated" at both the state and federal level, adding that his own company has "a long history of compliance with these regulations." Hydraulic fracturing, he says, "has been used safely for decades and in over a million wells." And with these words he approaches the heart of the battle over fracking today: How do you measure "safe"?

As fracking's proponents regularly point out, there have been no scientifically proven cases indisputably linking fracking to health problems or to water or air contamination. Indeed, according to the RRC—which says its staff "bases regulatory decisions on science and facts"—nowhere in the regulator's records is there "a single documented water-contamination case associated with the process of hydraulic fracturing in Texas." Although reports suggest that other aspects of the extraction process, such as wastewater disposal and leaks from faulty well casings, can lead to contamination, critics, including Wilson, generally agree that incontrovertible scientific evidence is difficult to come by. But they do not agree that this means fracking is safe—only that there hasn't been enough time or effort put into examining these issues. Baseline testing of water and air before fracking has begun would provide valuable data but is rarely done. And a lot of vital information cannot be publicly disclosed, because it is buried in the sealed court records of cases in which people have sued energy companies for damages and won settlements.

Meanwhile, for critics of fracking—and certainly for many of those, including Wilson, who have lived with it—the anecdotal evidence is enough to cause serious alarm. On the health front, "we are seeing the same array of symptoms across the country," but very little is being done to explore the causes, says David Brown. A toxicologist, Brown helped found the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project, which assists people with health problems in the Marcellus Shale, a bitterly contentious front in the fracking wars that stretches from New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio into West Virginia and Maryland. Nosebleeds, headaches, rashes, neurological and breathing problems—these are some of the symptoms that have surfaced in fracking zones and that "should be met with an immediate investigation by the CDC," Brown says. "Look at the West Nile virus. There were so few cases, but people acted immediately."

After signing the Braden lease, Wilson stayed on her land for two years. But with all the fracking going on around her property, she says, "I felt like I was living on the edge of a volcano." In 2010 she moved to an apartment in the nearby town of Denton, leaving her cherished horses in the care of a neighbor. The following year, she sold her ranchland and gave the horses to the property's new owner. Today she speaks of leaving her land as the end of her American dream. "If you are living your dream, you don't just tell yourself to stop dreaming it," she says. "You have to find a new one. But I couldn't." In fact, that dream had been a nightmare for some time, what with Wilson's financial problems, her struggles as a single working mother living alone far out in the countryside and the stresses of a job that felt deeply unfulfilling. Perhaps for that reason, the leasing of her mineral rights, the sale of her land and, indeed, her whole confrontation with fracking seem to have marked the rebirth of Sharon Wilson.

With her first check from Braden Exploration, Wilson bought herself some equipment—a laptop, a camera, a video recorder, binoculars—and made a $1,000 donation to Earthworks. She began to volunteer for the group at night and on weekends while working her day job as an office administrator at the University of North Texas. She focused her volunteer work on Earthworks' Oil and Gas Accountability Project (OGAP), which helps communities around the country that are affected by drilling.

An activist finds her voice

WILSON BEGAN to get extensive experience interviewing people whose lives had been affected by drilling. She'd first heard their stories through her blog. "They just started contacting me," she recalls. They sent photos, which she posted, but "then they started asking, 'Can you help us?' " she says. "Sometimes it was overwhelming." There were moments when she would "drop to the floor sobbing" at the stories she heard—of sick children and dying pets, of desperate parents who didn't know what to do when a rig suddenly rose up in their yard, or the whole family got rashes, or the air smelled so strongly of diesel fuel that they couldn't breathe properly.

Steve Lipsky and Shelly Perdue, two of the people Wilson has been working with, live in Parker County. One is a wealthy businessman, the other a personal assistant struggling to make ends meet. Wilson says Lipsky and Perdue illustrate that "it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor" when dealing with the energy companies.

A single mother, Perdue lives in a trailer tucked in the woods just outside the town of Granbury. Sitting with Wilson in her front yard in the shade of an oak tree hung with birdhouses and wind chimes, Perdue talks about what has happened to her since 2009, when Range Resources began fracking less than half a mile from her home. There were the trucks—giant rigs that backed onto her property, creating knee-deep ruts in her lawn. There were the headaches she experienced and the bouts of fatigue. And the fact that Perdue says she can't drink her tap water. Tests conducted by Range in 2010 showed high levels of methane, but according to its spokesperson, Matt Pitzarella, this was due to existing geological issues and problems with the construction of Perdue's well, not the company's drilling. Still, although Range told her she could safely drink her water after the company installed a gas vent on her well, Perdue is fearful of doing so. Her water, she notes, can be lit on CONTINUED ON PAGE 156

SHOULD FRACKING BE BANNED IN THE U.S.?

VOTE YES / NO

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DO YOU OWN WHAT'S UNDER YOUR HOME?

WHEN YOU BUY PROPERTY—whether a primary or secondary home, whether in a suburban, rural or vacation area—don't assume you are also buying whatever lies beneath the ground, warns New York real estate and environmental lawyer Elisabeth Radow. Another party may own the mineral rights, meaning there's a chance that gas or oil could be extracted from your land without your consent, affecting your property value for years while someone else collects the royalties. To find out what steps you should take before you buy—or how to check on the status of your current property—go to more.com/mineralrights.

she says as we drive back to her home in Allen. "We used to give people a way to click on our website and send an e-mail to legislators on key bills. And now they are telling us that they don't pay attention to e-mails. You have to *call* or show up in person. *How do people do that*? How do average citizens afford $160 a day for hotel and food to come to Austin? How do we match the industry? If the president is going to promote natural gas, he needs to listen to people who live with natural gas. He needs to do a fly-in and listen."

Whether or not Obama, or any other president, ever does this, Wilson will be working her 18-hour days, lobbying, amassing data and, above all, listening. She's now focusing on the Eagle Ford Shale, in south and west Texas, where wells are being drilled every day as if in a modern gold rush. Photos on her blog show a skyline dotted with smoking flares. She wants to bring experts in to talk to residents but worries about how Earthworks will be able to pay for that as well as the "safe houses" she would like to establish for people who don't have enough money to move even though fracking, she says, is making them ill. In their powerlessness, and their voicelessness, Wilson sees a bit of herself. And in helping them, she may be helping herself.

Back at home, Adam jokes that he is a big supporter of fracking, teasing his "ninja mom," as he has called her. At 18, he is already in his third year of college. Wilson's older son, Frank, lives in Dallas. "I tell my kids that they both deserve a perfect mother and I am sorry I wasn't one," she says, adding that she's awed they're not bitter. "I learned a lot from them—that you make your peace about your past and you move on." And then one day, after a long struggle, it all comes together. "Have you seen my tattoo?" Wilson asks. She got it—and the house—in 2011, when Earthworks made her its full-time organizer for Texas OGAP. She pulls her hair away to reveal the back of her neck and a tattoo of an enormous dragonfly—"the symbol of transformation," she says. ✻

SUZANNA ANDREWS is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*.