



## **Transient Relief Camp at Kern County Fairgrounds**

1930-1937

By Gilbert Peter Gia

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The economy was strong in the 1920s, business good, jobs plentiful.<sup>1</sup> But in late 1929 financial disaster struck America. Several weeks later an early shock wave of the Wall Street Crash was plainly obvious in Bakersfield where more than one hundred men, 16 to 60, slept that night on newspapers on the floor of Salvation Army headquarters downtown. In previous weeks charity guests there had numbered ten or fifteen daily, but after the New Year the Sally always had more than a hundred. The Bakersfield Californian wrote, "They were once plumbers, bakers, cooks, clerks, and members of those trades that are the bulwark of our self-termed civilization."<sup>2</sup>

In the spring of 1930 unemployment in the West Side oil fields around Taft was not a serious problem, but that was not true for other workers. The Red Cross then was appealing to Taft residents to ease unemployment by hiring a worker, even if for only a few hours.<sup>3</sup> By the end of April, one out of twenty men in

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1920 and 1930 the city's population increased from 19,000 to 34,000. (Bakersfield Californian, Mar 15, 1930, "City Population shows Big Gain")

<sup>2</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jan 27, 1930, "Salvation Army Brings Thanksgiving Relief to Unfortunate and Jobless". The headquarters was at 20th and K.

<sup>3</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 3, 1930, "West Side Seeks Help For Men Out of Work".

Bakersfield was out of work.<sup>4</sup> Days later unemployment was shown to be 12%. Although that soon dropped to 3%, the very next day it was shown at 5%.<sup>5</sup>

But local concern was not extreme because no one knew how bad it would get or know for how many years it would last. For the next twelve months the Stock Market sputtered and struggled, but by the end of 1930 America definitely had entered what is now called the Great Depression. For the next seven years local jobs were especially scarce for unskilled workers. Bakersfield Californian owner and editor Alfred Harrell noted near the end of the decade,

“Figures are eloquent, sometimes more so than words. Kern County relief expenditures for 1937-38 will be three times the total of 1935-36, which in its turn was doubled in 1936-37. Apparently the number of indigents advances with this increase. From this it may be deduced that population increase is not always advantageous. Formerly it was supposed to be a sign of prosperity.”<sup>6</sup>

Hobo jungles along the Kern River were numerous, and sanitary conditions there were so bad that Bakersfield residents worried about contaminated air blowing in from the river. In the summer of 1937 a Bakersfield committee advised Kern County supervisors to buy river-bank land north of the fairgrounds, pipe-in water, erect tents and sanitary facilities, and place the people living there under supervision of the county health department.<sup>7</sup>

Back in 1930, Bakersfield’s movers and shakers were convinced that the city could solve its own unemployment problems. In the first week of April city fathers created a 1930s-style United Way to coordinate fundraising and distribution of funds to philanthropic groups. Various called the Welfare Funding Association or Community Chest, it enjoyed the endorsement of the Bakersfield City Council, leading ministers, merchants, fraternal groups, and booster clubs. A full-page ad in the April 7, 1930 Bakersfield Californian explained how the Welfare Funding Association would gather funds and what it would do with them.

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<sup>4</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 18, 1930, “C.C.A. Directors Seeking Plan To Aid Enumeration Of City Census”

<sup>5</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 29, 1930; May 1, 1930

<sup>6</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jun 12, 1937, “Random Notes”

<sup>7</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jun 8, 1937, “Transient Camp Plan Submitted”.

"We believe that under our funding plan Bakersfield will be on a more economical basis than the-hit-or-miss, more-or-less unorganized, spasmodic and duplicated procedure of the past. The welfare and benefit of the entire community is our own personal welfare and benefit. Community responsibility is a personal responsibility. It is not a club, a political party, or a branch of the government, but is the organized citizenship banded together for a certain worthwhile purpose, that of paying a community debt."<sup>8</sup>

Who was expected to contribute to the Community Chest? The association queried similar-sized communities and decided that the contribution of an average person should be one day's pay a month. In effect, Bakersfield citizens were being asked to solve, on their own, the problems of local poverty and unemployment.<sup>9</sup>

Ten months into the program, in December 1930, the county opened a soup line. Hundreds of men and some women were in the queue, people who had been eking out a daily existence "marked only by the the meals they receive irregularly at the hands of charity."<sup>10</sup> The Californian wrote,

"While Bakersfield organizations and citizens redouble their efforts to overcome a social condition forced upon the community as the result of the trying times, efforts on the part of civic bodies, businessmen, employers and citizens seem to be a vital necessity for social workers and others close to the heart of the unemployment situation in maintaining the jobless and penniless who dine at the "dime" shacks and at the back doors of residences -- unable to lift themselves from the social morass in which they are enmeshed."<sup>11</sup>

The soup line opened its doors exactly twelve times in the first week of December 1930, and over those few days more than 1,500 people dropped their dimes in the cashier's box, and scores of others were fed gratis. The soup line was not a place to spend the night. Where did the people go? Some still had roofs, but "when night fell, the 'jungles' north of Bakersfield were aglow with the campfires of huddled humanity, while others sought shelter in city parks, vacant buildings,

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<sup>8</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 7, 1930, "Community Chest Established"

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 6 1930, "Helping Hand Is Necessary"

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Dime shacks probably meant "greasy-spoon" cafes.

boxcars, and even the county jail – in other words, any place that gave shelter from the cold.”<sup>12</sup>

The Californian observed that they were people who could not help themselves.

“It is true that in all but a few rare instances the unemployed and penniless from other points who have congregated in Bakersfield are not in a mental or physical condition to better their plight -- they must be shown the way out of their distress. Study of them, and conversation with them, reveals that most of them display a remarkable degree of apathy towards the idea of raising themselves, and that they possess a startling indifference to the efforts being made to aid them. This stoicism is due to a succession of hungry days and bedless nights. An empty stomach and tired body does not foster initiative. Practically all of these who are fed at the Kern Food Depot, at the Salvation Army, at back doors, in the kitchens of bakeries and restaurants, are unskilled workers. They have no education to speak of, and their fingers are not trained do any particular trade.”<sup>13</sup>

By December 1930 oil field layoffs were common. A welfare department employee wrote this about an “indescribably pitiful” family: “One oil worker with four children applied for help at welfare headquarters. He had been earning \$7 a day, but expenses had taken it all. Unemployment came without warning. His car, which was paid for except for \$100, had to go, and he he was suddenly destitute.”<sup>14</sup>

Time passed, and in many Bakersfield homes family larders had reached alarmingly-low levels as breadwinners looked for work.<sup>15</sup> However, it had become noticeable that more and more of the unemployed around Bakersfield were out-of-towners who had made their way to Kern County for jobs. When growers in the Arvin, Buttonwillow, and the Buena Vista Lake areas advertised for cotton pickers,<sup>16</sup> the Californian wondered “Why not pick cotton?” and it answered its own question.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 4, 1930, “Pitiful Conditions Discovered Among Bakersfield Unemployed”

<sup>15</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 6, 1930, “Helping Hand Is Necessary”

<sup>16</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 4, 1930, “Cotton Pickers Needed in Arvin and Other Areas”

"A common belief shared by citizens in general quickly was shattered not only by the unemployed who have tried such work, but by employment agency officials and cotton growers themselves. Although rated one of the lowest in the scale of occupations, cotton picking nevertheless requires a particular type of technique, and the uninitiated cannot hope to earn more than \$1 a day. Before they can start work, the pickers must have transportation to the field, purchase a cotton sack costing \$1, and arrange for bedding and a sleeping place. The unemployed have suggested 'Go broke and try it yourself.'<sup>17</sup> One family, man and wife and two small children, who has picked cotton for years reported that the family's combined earnings picking cotton rarely rises above \$6 a day. And all their backs are bent from the stooping posture required to pluck the bolls and carry them along on their backs. Theirs is a peculiar situation. No place to go, nothing to do, nothing to eat unless it is supplied. As one prominent social worker declared, 'They can't raise themselves by their bootstraps. They don't know how it's done. Many of them lack the boots.'<sup>18</sup>



"Squatters along highway near Bakersfield, California. Penniless refugees from dust bowl. Twenty-two in family, thirty-nine evictions, now encamped near Bakersfield without shelter, without water and looking for work in the cotton." Library of Congress

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<sup>17</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 6, 1930, "Helping Hand Is Necessary"

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

The Welfare Funding Association was still busy at the end of 1931.<sup>19</sup> It had channeled contributions to charities and also funded paychecks for street maintenance, pavement improvement, and levee work on the river north of Bakersfield. And once again the Association turned to business and individuals for their financial support.<sup>20</sup> This time it asked for one day's pay a month plus a five-month commitment. The next day sixty-eight people subscribed, and the Californian printed every name.<sup>21</sup>

The Unemployment Relief Program via Community Chest provided jobs for 410 breadwinners. They improved county fire trails, city parks, storm and drainage ditches, and did general clean-up of brush and debris. In December 1931 men were excavating for an enormous artificial lake at Kern River Park [Hart Park].<sup>22</sup>

Not all Community Chest funds went to the Unemployment Relief Program. At Lincoln School in Taft more than a hundred children received free and low-cost breakfasts and lunches. Half the expense came from the school budget and the other from the Welfare Funding Association, to which Lincoln School teachers had already contributed \$1,000.<sup>23</sup> However, teachers and welfare workers worried about how children would get food during the Christmas holiday.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of 1931 Kern County resources had been relentlessly strained by poverty and joblessness. On January 22, 1932, in the last year of President Herbert Hoover's term, the Federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) was initiated to shore-up financial institutions, corporations, and railroads. But any trickle-down from the RFC did no noticeable good for down-and-out people in Kern County.

On January 5, 1932 "hunger marchers" carrying signs reading "\$150 Winter Relief" and "Abolish Vagrancy Laws" converged on San Francisco to protest growing poverty and unemployment, but governor "Sunny Jim" Rolph brushed them off.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Nov 6, 1931, "First Donations to Unemployment Relief Fund Made"

<sup>20</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Nov 9, 1931, "Relief Workers to Meet this Evening to Plan Campaign"

<sup>21</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Nov 10 1931, "60 Committeemen Cover City in Relief Canvass"

<sup>22</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 7, 1931, "410 Men Given Work Under Relief Program"; Dec 15, 1931, "Improvement of Kern River Park Progresses; 200 men given work"

<sup>23</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 11, 1931, "Children given Meals at Taft"

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jan 5, 1932, "Hunger Marchers Receive Cold Shoulder at Fresno"

However, Bakersfield was addressing its problem; by this date its Unemployment Relief Program had opened a transient work camp at Kern County Fairgrounds.<sup>26</sup>

The program addressed a grave need, but it could not save all desperate people. In April 1932 a man's body was found at a privately-owned campground north of Bakersfield. He had hanged himself. Two tickets for meals at the county work camp were found in his pocket.<sup>27</sup>

Unemployment got worse. In October 1932 new arrivals at Bakersfield were hunting for repair jobs on the Tehachapi-Caliente flood disaster or for work on the Bakersfield/Los Angeles Grapevine relocation project, but those men were not needed. L.B. Nourse of the Kern County Chamber of Commerce reported that all positions had been filled by local men, and he urged transients to look elsewhere for jobs.<sup>28</sup>

In January 1933, when the labor camp at the fairgrounds was a year old, a Californian reporter stopped in to visit.

"Men of all ages, from 16 to 70, are at the camp. Many of the youths garbed in better clothes would grace a ballroom. Some of the older men, with sartorial & tonsorial service, would make splendid motion picture characters as bankers, lawyers, or physicians or members of some other profession. However, there are others, marred by the battles of life, who would offer frightening characterizations of screen gangsters or in similar bad-man roles."<sup>29</sup>

"There are no social or color lines at the Kern County Work Camp where 300 men are being fed and sheltered in exchange for a few hours of labor. With enough work to keep their minds off troubles and to offer them enough exercise to keep them physically fit, and a warm place to rest at night, the men consider themselves lucky under the existing circumstances. White, yellow, black and red, the men of various colors and nationalities mix easily,<sup>30</sup> for the prejudices of

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<sup>26</sup> The county fairground was on Chester Avenue adjacent to the south bank of the Kern River.

<sup>27</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 18, 1932, "Find Body of Unknown Man At Camp"

<sup>28</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Oct 25, 1932, "Kern County Is Not In Need Of Labor, It Says"

<sup>29</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jan 19, 1933, "Men Of Many Colors And Creeds Gathered At Kern Labor Camp"

<sup>30</sup> "There are a couple of Indians, many Negroes, and more than 200 white men."

normal existence are forgotten when life settles to the basic principles of food and shelter.”

“Consider the attractive blond chap whose muscles of steel and curly locks would put Bill Boyd of flicker fame to shame.<sup>31</sup> Another youth with a black patch over an empty eye socket has the gift of expression which would make him more than a mediocre writer of feature stories. There is a Jewish youngster, with snapping black eyes and handsome profile, who wears an Alpine hat and carries an air of joviality cockier than his headgear. Another chap, husky and good-looking carries a shiny steel hook where his right arm once swang a mighty fist.”

“Then there is a slender youngster who lacked clothing enough to keep him warm in summer here. A traffic officer, owner of a discarded uniform, rigged him up in fine style. The lucky boy now sports the uniform - - cap, coat, breeches, and puttees, and is the proudest fellow in camp. All he lacks is a shave and a haircut and the motorcycle and he would look good on Lieutenant Bob Powers’ squadron of traffic officers.”<sup>32</sup>

“Bakersfield residents with jaded appetites should watch the motley crew attack their two meals daily. Each one eats more than a half loaf of bread every meal. They get steaming hot prunes, potatoes, coffee, mush, meat, and other types of substantial, wholesome and clean food from the Kern General Hospital Kitchen. More than 30 gallons of stew goes down their throats at each evening meal -- a lot of stew in anyway you look at it.”

“The men work six hours each day and receive tickets enough for three meals. Yesterday, according to superintendent Hal Griffis, the men did \$1,100 worth of cleaning-up work. The work is of such nature it is not competitive and does not keep local unemployed from an opportunity to labor. It is work which the city or county could not afford to do [pay for] now but still it is worth a lot of money to the community.”

“During the leisure hours the men read books and magazines donated by kind-hearted Bakersfield citizens. They ‘boil out’ their clothing, cut one another's hair,

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<sup>31</sup> William Lawrence Boyd (1895-1972) was an American film actor best known for portraying the cowboy hero Hopalong Cassidy.

<sup>32</sup> From 1933 to 1945 Robert B. Powers (1900-1976) was Bakersfield Chief of Police.



shave, tell stories, or listen to the radio given them by Witham & Booth. A phonograph also adds to the entertainment.”

“Kern County, one of the first districts to devise the work camp method of caring for the transient unemployed, is doing more than its share of charity work in that sphere. Then, too, petty crime, which generally follows an influx of strangers who are broke and hungry, is decreased. The more vicious crimes generally chronicled when hundreds of idle and destitute men gather in a small community are missing here, and there is little doubt but that the work camp is worth the trouble and expense to which society is burdened by its establishment, authorities declare.”<sup>33</sup>

The Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) enacted at the end of President Hoover’s term was supposed to have distributed funds to the states so they could pay for make-work jobs for their local populations. That should have meant jobs for Kern County, but the RFC made little use of its powers. Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president on January 20, 1933, and over the forty-three days between his election and his inauguration, serious Federal money began flowing to California.

On January 26 the Californian wrote,

“California’s first contribution for unemployment relief from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a check for \$140,000, has been deposited with the state treasurer.<sup>34</sup> Machinery was immediately put in motion to expand the state labor-camp program for unemployed transients from 5,000 to 15,000 men. Another check for \$140,000 will be delivered February 10, and an additional \$280,000 for the month of March and April. Said S. Rexford Black who was San Francisco chairman of the state labor camp committee, ‘This means there will no longer be any occasion for panhandling on the streets of California cities by jobless men. If anyone stops you on the street and asked you for a dime to buy coffee and donuts, you will be justified in telling him that good food, warm clothes and

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<sup>33</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jan 19, 1933, “Men of Many Colors and Creeds Gathered At Kern Labor Camp”.

<sup>34</sup> The equivalent unskilled-labor wage today is about \$8.2M

shelter are now available at the state labor camp, and all he needs to do is apply."<sup>35</sup>

Bakersfield's economy continued to decline. How many men were without paid work? In May 1933 welfare department canvassers found 3,962 jobless men with families, 600 in Taft and the balance in Bakersfield.<sup>36</sup> That same week Kern County Union High School teachers, office assistants, clerks, janitors, bus drivers, and mechanics were informed that effective September 1933 their salaries would be cut 15%.<sup>37</sup>

Positive news that week was the overwhelming passage of the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) pushed through Congress by its Democratic majority. The Bakersfield Californian wrote, "Under the latest Federal loan to this county, almost as many as 1,000 men will be employed in the county daily until the funds are exhausted. With the last loan made, men are being employed on the lake project at the county park and in grading school grounds about the city. Some road work is being accomplished."<sup>38</sup>

The fairgrounds work camp housed 260 men, but in May 1933 it and similar camps in California were being disbanded.<sup>39</sup> Superintendent of County Airports Hal B. Griffis, who was also supervisor of the fairgrounds work camp, spoke there on May 11, 1933 and noted that between December 15, 1929 and February 15, 1930, 27,568 meals had been served at a cost of about three cents each. In return for food and lodging, the men had provided 64,835 man-hours of work, which was about two hours of labor for each meal.<sup>40</sup> Between December 1929 and May 1930 when the camp was under both county and state supervision, 7,840 men were fed and lodged there, 86,925 meals were served, and 183,089 man-hours worked.<sup>41</sup>

Said Superintendent Griffis,

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<sup>35</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jan 26, 1933, "Sacramento. RFC Aiding in State Labor Camp And Money Arrives"

<sup>36</sup> Bakersfield Californian May 11, 1933, "Report 1000 Kern Men To Be Employed; 125 Working"

<sup>37</sup> Bakersfield Californian, May 10, 1933, "15% Cut In Salaries For Local Teachers"

<sup>38</sup> Bakersfield Californian May 11, 1933, "Report 1000 Kern Men To Be Employed; 125 Working"

<sup>39</sup> Bakersfield Californian, May 9, 1933, "Additional U.S. Forest Camp Is Planned In Kern"

<sup>40</sup> Bakersfield California May 11, 1933. "Labor Camp Meals Served At Only Three Cents Each"

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

"I can only hope the operation of the camp, the obtaining of the transient labor, the low cost of the meals, and the part played in the solution of the county transit unemployment problem has met with the approval of the citizens. For my part I cannot too greatly express my appreciation for the cooperation that has been given me by the public in donating clothing, magazines and other necessities; by the Kern General Hospital staff under Dr. Joe Smith; by assistant chief of police Adolph Thompson; by The Bakersfield Californian; by the office of Sheriff Caz Walser, and by my assistant Morrie Skeleton."<sup>42</sup>

Superintendent Griffis listed the men's work this way: city streets department, 23,248 man-hours; Mosquito Abatement District, 34,810 man-hours; Kern General Hospital grounds, 77,052 man-hours; fairgrounds, 33,560 man-hours; care and maintenance of the fairgrounds exposition building, 18,682 man-hours; Kern County airport, 36,005 man-hours; Work Camp kitchen, 9,264 man-hours; cleaning the old-hospital grounds,<sup>43</sup> 1,239 man-hours; and fairgrounds wood yard,<sup>44</sup> 52,379 man-hours.<sup>45</sup> The county fairgrounds camp became headquarters for the local transient relief administration, and several dozen men continued to work there.

Men departing the fairgrounds camp had been offered jobs at four Federal forestry conservation camps expected to open at the end of May at Glennville, Isabella, Havilah, and Frazier Mountain -- and possibly another camp on Breckenridge Mountain or near Tehachapi. Once in operation, those camps would host a paid work force of 1,000 Kern County men.<sup>46</sup>

The camp's population dwindled, and the Salvation Army foresaw immediate challenges. Citizen support in 1932 for its humane work had fallen short, and the Army's resources were near bottom. The Californian wrote, "Dire need of the Salvation Army was aggravated today with the closing of the state labor camp,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The county hospital was at 19th and Oak Streets. In 1937 the grounds were sold for home sites. (Bakersfield Californian, Sep 28, 1937, "Last Parcel of Old Hospital Land Sold")

<sup>44</sup> The men had sawed and stacked 520 cords of wood which was sold. Some was given to the poor.

<sup>45</sup> Bakersfield California, May 11, 1933, "Labor Camp Meals Served At Only Three Cents Each"

<sup>46</sup> Bakersfield Californian, May 9, 1933, "Additional U.S. Forest Camp Is Planned In Kern". See May 25, 1933, "Recruit 160 Men For Reforestation Work. Camp Locations To Be Selected Immediately"

throwing hundreds more men back upon the resources of the Bakersfield corps which almost alone is shouldering the heavy financial burden."<sup>47</sup>

California's transient camps may have been among the the first in the nation to be closed. In December 1933 a popular columnist-social commentator wrote this to Alfred Harrell.

"You sure got to give it to this Administration for trying to do something for the down and out. Over in Phoenix Arizona, the other day, I run into something I had not read about but I understand there is quite a few in southwestern states. It's called a government transient camp. I went out to see `em. There was about 700 men and boys (lots very young) and they kept them there and fed them and gave them clothes. They received no money, good food, good cots and blankets. All had to work. A lot of them were making wooden toys for the children in Phoenix for Christmas. A taxpayer can't kick on his money being spent if it's on food. - Yours, Will Rogers." <sup>48</sup>

In 1934 the fairground camp became a Federal transit camp, and the exposition building once again quartered men. Those entering for the first time checked their bundles, were given medical exams, and those in need of medical assistance were sent to a hospital. The rest were provided clean blankets, a towel, a bar of soap, and a bunk. Men who had been in the camp for a few days and had shown a willingness to work were issued replacement clothing. <sup>49</sup>

Everyone got enough to eat. In March 1934, 30,016 meals were served there at a cost of about seven-and-a-half cents each, and it included the tobacco ration distributed three times a week. Meals were not soup-line fair either. Breakfast was oatmeal, eggs, toast, potatoes, and coffee but sometimes bacon, ham, or hot cakes. <sup>50</sup>

A visiting reporter noted,

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<sup>47</sup> Bakersfield Californian, May 10, 1933, "Salvation Army In Need Of Cash"

<sup>48</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Dec 18, 1933, "Daily Comment By Will Rogers"

<sup>49</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 6, 1934, "Many At Transient Camp Abandon Life Of Wandering"

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

"There is a decided willingness on the part of the men to work, the directors say, and out of the ranks have been picked some of the most valuable helpers around the camp. One man is in charge of the checkroom, another in charge of the tool room issues the picks, shovels and other equipment and takes care of the small branch library loaned by the Kern County Free Public Library; another acts as a shoemaker, fixing up shoes that can be mended if they haven't trampled over too many highways; and some busy themselves with handcraft of various kinds and have sold their cleverly contrived articles in the city."<sup>51</sup>

They were grateful for a place to hang their hat, get food, and have a roof over their heads. They wanted to pay their way, and they did -- six days a week, five hours a day. Seventy-five of them worked for mosquito abatement, 160 for city streets, 30 for the fairgrounds, and 15 for Kern General Hospital maintenance. Others staffed the camp headquarters, cleaned, did wood cutting, and accomplished those "odds and ends of that make the camp a thoroughly organized community."<sup>52</sup>

"One man does all the barbering for the camp. The large building at the fairground is also used as a clubroom for card games, reading, and smoking. The recreation program has baseball and horseshoes. Witham & Booth have loaned a radio for the use of the camp, and Kimball & Stone a projector for the showing of motion pictures on educational topics that have been loaned from the University of California."

"The racial analysis of the camp's population reveals 130 white men, one Indian, five Mexicans and twenty-two Negroes. The age analysis of the camp reveals seven between the ages of 16 and 20; twenty-four men 21 to 24; forty-two between 25 and 34 years; thirty-nine between 35 and 49 years; and twenty-four who are 50 or more."

"One of the oldest men at the camp, Edward M. Hudson, is the poet laureate and interpreter. His eyes are keenly blue, and his ruddy countenance is set off with a white Van Dyke beard. He speaks Spanish fluently, German and French a little, and he manages to make himself understood in Italian. So he is called upon by

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

the camp directors to interpret for foreign comrades at the camp from time to time. The youngest member of the camp is a ruddy, brown eyed, brown cheeked little boy who says he is 16 years old but looks to be not much more than 14. He will be sent to the Uncle Sam's camp for boys in Los Angeles next week. 'Yes, I'll go there, but I don't want to go to any reform school.' It was explained that the camp in no way resembled a reform school."<sup>53</sup>

The transient relief camp was in no way a reform school. In November 1933 a vaudeville show was held there with local entertainers performing tap and acrobatic dancing acts along side camp vocalists and harmonica and guitar players.<sup>54</sup> But there was plenty of work, too. In January 1934 six Federally-funded CWA projects employed 238 men around Bakersfield. They razed the remaining platform of the old city jail, constructed a new pistol range at the city yards [on Truxtun Avenue where Amtrak is today], graded streets, set surveying bench marks, built tennis courts at Jastro Park, and painted city hall. The equivalent-labor value of the work is about \$2.3M in today's dollars.<sup>55</sup>

That spring a second relief camp was planned for out-of-work transients.<sup>56</sup> By this date the economics had been worked out. The county provided land and water, and the Federal government provided the rest. The way the labor was allocated was also settled: Relief work would not compete against private industry. When County Supervisor Hinman was asked how he would use his relief labor, he said they would be doing hand work on Rattlesnake Grade Road. Hinman also alluded to a future relief camp of five-acres on the north side of the river from Kern River Park [Hart Park].<sup>57</sup>

Back in the summer of 1933 editor Alfred Harrell had written,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Nov 9, 1934, "Entertainment Given At Camp". The vitality of the fairgrounds camp in early 1935 was obvious when a concert show and boxing matches were held there on the same day. (Bakersfield Californian, Feb 21, 1935)

<sup>55</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jan 11, 1934, "\$42,122 In Federal Money Being Expended In City For Six Vital Improvements, Report Reveals"

<sup>56</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 9, 1935, "Establishment of Second Kern Relief Camp Planned".

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

"The maintenance of the work camp did something more than provide relief for destitute people. Immediately upon its establishment there was a notable decrease in the number of men seeking aid on the streets or from house to house, and the police record discloses petty crimes were at a minimum throughout the city during the winter months. All in all, the activities of the county and subsequently of the state were along lines that gave aid to men who were idle through no fault of their own, and at a negligible cost as compared with the service rendered. The news from many portions of the country, indicating increase in employment, lead us to the hope that not many months will pass before there will be labor opportunities which will greatly decrease the army of the unemployed. Incidentally when that comes to pass it will relieve government, nation, state, county and city, of the heavy burden which it has carried during the past two winters."<sup>58</sup>

Chief of Police Robert B. Powers wrote to the city board of trustees, "Some few years ago a large part of our work here had to do with the investigating of transients who were reported to us as suspicious characters, men who had dropped off a freight train or who had hitch-hiked into town and had no place to go. They naturally wandered about the streets at night, and citizens would report them as prowlers. Although their crimes, as a rule, hardly amounted to more than small thefts of food, they were quite a problem to us. Since the transient camp has been established, we have been unusually fortunate in the absence of unemployed men on the streets at night. When we do find a man wandering around the business or residence districts at night, we send him out to the transient camp."<sup>59</sup>

The Depression worsened. Harrell wrote this in 1935 in response to voices accusing the out-of-work of being freeloaders.

"Some employees may have come through the depression without much discomfort. Many, however, have lost everything, and like millions of employees

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<sup>58</sup> Bakersfield Californian, May 12, 1933, "Random Notes". Tax delinquent properties here were fewer than elsewhere in the state. Harrell's statement was cautiously optimistic. See also, Bakersfield Californian, Oct, 9, 1933, "1000 Cotton Strikers in Court Yard".

<sup>59</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Apr 11, 1935, "Site Near Park Is Favored For Transient Camp."

have had to accept government relief. When work could not be got because of circumstances beyond the control of both employer and employee, they had to accept government relief or starve, or see their family starve. When the government embarked on its relief program it did so because of the call of humanity. There was no work to be had, but individuals and family could not be allowed to starve in a civilized land. To make a wholesale charge that all on the referrals are incompetent [freeloaders] betrays a lack of understanding of the economic situation and an arbitrary ruling by a person who is fortunate enough to be able to enforce [justify] his judgment."<sup>60</sup>

Two years passed, and although Federal money was coming in, Kern County still faced many financial challenges, and hope was waning. Harrell wrote, "Because transients from other states find Kern County a refuge from the impoverished conditions in their home states, this region faces a problem that menaces its social and health conditions. Citizens of the county are involved in a situation that is not of their creation, and while they are willing to deal with the problem humanely, the financial burden threatens to exceed the limit of their powers to meet. However humanely they may regard the question, the burden is too great for the financial resources of the county."<sup>61</sup>

But from my past interviews I knew that people scrambled and people got by. Ray Robinett told me his father had long layoffs from the Southern Pacific, and when that happened the family moved out of their rented house and lived on Breckenridge Mountain until his father was rehired. Ed Richardson said that next to his service station on Edison Highway was a sandwich shop run by woman named Mable. "She had a two-gallon pot of soup on the stove all the time. The Oakies came through there for three or four or five years in old touring cars that were jalopies. The kids had worn-out clothes and looked terrible. Mable gave soup to them. I was on the Salvation Army Board, and we gave clothes out to the kids." Irene Balasis Restituto said, "My parents owned Pearl's Cash Grocery, but in 1934 the economy was so bad that our customers couldn't pay their charge accounts,

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<sup>60</sup> Bakersfield California, Jun 29, 1935, "Relief And Work"

<sup>61</sup> Bakersfield California, Jul 24, 1937, "Federal Aid Urged"



and we had to close the store. After a few months my dad's friend Percy Branson who was the manager of Kern River Park told him about the caretaker job at the park." Lino Pasquini told me, "When I lived in San Francisco with my parents my dad set up a restaurant and ravioli factory. In 1935 dad sold his part of the business, and we moved back to Bakersfield and took the ravioli machinery. But Bakersfield didn't have a big enough Italian population to support the business, so in 1937 dad opened an old old restaurant in a hotel at 19th and O."

In 2003, CATO Institute Senior Fellow Jim Powell noted that the Federal grants to states were supported by massive Federal tax increases: from \$1.6 billion in 1933 to \$5.3 billion in 1940. They were personal income taxes, inheritance taxes, and corporate income taxes, but the majority of New Deal funding came from the excise tax levied on alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, matches, candy, chewing gum, margarine, fruit juice, soft drinks, cars, tires, telephone calls, movie tickets, playing cards, electricity, radios, and many, many other everyday things, including rides on the little train at Kern River Park. All of that meant the New Deal was substantially financed by the middle class and the poor.

Powell wrote, "FDR might not have intended to harm millions of poor people, but that's what happened."<sup>62</sup> In Powell's book *FDR's Folly, How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (2003) he posits that New Deal taxation prolonged unemployment and retarded the country's economic growth. Granted, high taxation was no doubt a drag on both growth and job creation, but New Deal funding also created jobs, issued paychecks, and saved many poor families from starvation.

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<sup>62</sup> Jim Powell, *How FDR's New Deal Harmed Millions of Poor People*. CATO Institute, Commentary, Dec 29, 2003. <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/how-fdrs-new-deal-harmed-millions-poor-people>

