



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Interview in 1926 with Pioneer Teacher Cora Bender

by Gilbert P. Gia

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YESTERYEAR'S SCHOOL GONE
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Pioneer Educator Tells Story
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WAS TEACHING DURING 1877

By VIRGINIA REED

THE development of the Kern county school system and the subsequent effect on the children has been entertainingly related by Mrs. Cora Bender, pioneer educator of Kern county. Mrs. Bender, who is now principal of the Washington school in East Bakersfield, ing, and there were other rich mines going day and night. There were 40 pupils in the school there and the work was somewhat easier. Shortly after this there was a great furore raised in Bakersfield over the prevalence of impo-rted teachers in the town. There was an election for school super-

The interview follows:

The development of the Kern county school system and the subsequent effect on the children has been entertainingly related by Mrs. Cora Bender, pioneer educator of Kern county.¹ Mrs. Bender, who is now principal of the Washington school in East Bakersfield, began her teaching career in 1877 at Walkers Basin. Walking two miles to school was not considered a hardship, but merely part of the day's routine.

Spending \$14 on a wardrobe for the school term was not a cause for tears, but a reasonable price for sunbonnets and gingham mother-hubbards. Going through the day with neither watch nor clock was not a source of lamentations but an amusing reason for

¹ This article by Virginia Reed appeared in the Apr 9, 1926 Bakersfield Californian.

learning a more primitive way of telling time. Willy Walser, brother of Cas, the sheriff, made a daily pilgrimage to an old oak tree where a large and rusty nail threw its shadow, revealing the hour when the children were freed from the house of learning and sent into the fields to milk the cows, gather the eggs and feed the pigs.

Had Entertainment

The first school was small and the teacher was an important personage in the life of the community. The Rankin boys, now well known in Bakersfield, were two popular youngsters and the children of the district would congregate at the Rankin home, with Mrs. Bender a lively member of the party, and promote entertainment that the young people of today would consider the pastime for the aged or mentally deficient.

After the cows were driven to pasture, and the chickens shooed out of the lettuce patch, the young folks would take their hymn books and their Bibles and with lusty voices sing away the hours, or with grave thoughts and eager minds read some chapters from the Bible. When the solemnity of these occasions became too severe they would mount their horses and dash through the wild undergrowth or across the alkaline plains like young savages. The only other outdoor sport was in direct contrast to this. They played croquet and liked it!

Came to Sumner

Mrs. Bender's next experience in directing the minds of the potential celebrates of the county was in Sumner, now East Bakersfield, where she taught all the grades from the first through the ninth, there being no high school then, and to the appalling number of 67. Would a teacher today know what to do with 67 children? It is more than likely that they would find themselves in the same state of mind as the old woman who lived in the shoe. Of course, Mrs. Bender had her problems but she did know what to do There were trying times but there were merry times, too.

One day young Darden Brown, a prominent man here now, asked to be excused from the room, and when more time had passed than the teacher deemed necessary she left her class and was hot on the trail of the "young scamp." Two or three blocks from school she found the truant playing toreador to a group of tarantulas. The substitute of hairy spiders for maddened bulls added to the fun for Darden and held none more terror than daddy-long-legs. "Would Darden be just as brave today?" asked Mrs. Bender.

Went to Havilah

In 1880 Mrs. Bender went to Havilah, a prosperous mining town and formerly the country seat. The old Warrington mine was working, and there were other rich mines going day and night. There were 40 pupils in the school there, and the work was somewhat easier. Shortly after this there was a great furor raised in Bakersfield over the prevalence of imported teachers in the town. There was an election for school

superintendent, and J. P. (Zip) Cuneo was elected with an overwhelming majority. One of Mr. Cuneo's first official moves was to initiate home teachers in the city schools.² Mrs. Cora Bender with Alfred Harrell and Miss Jessie Gregory were placed in the Emerson school.³ They constituted the playground committee, the physical, education department, the art department, the principal, the primary and eighth grade teachers and successful disciplinarians as well.

'The boys and girls played together at town-ball and other games that are just a name to the present Emerson school pupils, and had withal little or none of the trouble that is so much talked of today. Separating the boys and girls was out of the question and the children managed to weather the temptations that confronted them with greater fortitude than is seen now,' said Mrs. Bender.

Principal at Washington

When the towns of Bakersfield and Kern were consolidated, Mrs. Bender was placed in the Washington school as teaching principal. She worked under this plan for two years and was then made supervising principal, a position that she has been holding ever since. She has seen new features coming one by one into the school systems, and she has had pleasant and unpleasant reactions to the changes. She regrets [*the loss of*] the old way of teaching handwriting. With the present Palmer system every child writes like his neighbor and all individuality is lost.

Another change that Mrs. Bender is unable to account for is the complete disappearance of the reverence and affection with whom the pupils of former days held their tutors [*teachers*]. No longer do the youngsters walk eight or nine blocks to meet their teacher and hang on her arm, her smile and her tender remonstrance with the eagerness that today they exhibit toward Gloria Swanson and Nita Naldi.⁴

The departmental work is partly responsible for the change. The attention of the children is so divided among the many instructors that it is difficult for them to reach any degree of intimacy, and the playground director is seldom a teacher of the same pupil whose recreation she supervises.

² local teachers

³ Alfred Harrell (1863-1946) taught at Shamrock School (now Wasco) from 1883 to 1885. During that period he was appointed to the Kern county board of education. From 1885 to 1886 he taught at Tehachapi School, and from 1886 to 1890 at the Bakersfield School. In 1886 Harrell, 23, was elected county superintendent of schools. He began his term Jan 1, 1887 and served until Jan 1, 1899. In 1897 Harrell bought the Bakersfield Californian, a newspaper with a circulation of 300. [Edmund Ross Harrington, *A History of the Office of the Kern County Superintendent of Schools*, 31st Annual Publication of the Kern County Historical society and the County of Kern Through its Museum, (printer not shown), 1969]

⁴ Actress Nita Naldi was prominent in movies from 1920 to 1929

Have Broader Views

But in spite of the tendency to criticize the morals of the youth of the day, Mrs. Bender does not see any material difference in the degree of their folly, only in the kind. It is the same in their studies. Owing to the motion picture, the automobile, the radio and many other modern inventions the modern child is broader in its view of life, but its actual knowledge of the major subjects is not as great. There is not the time or the desire to spend hours on tables of arithmetic, systems of phonetics, study of language and history. There is too much practical knowledge to be gained outside the school-room doors and the theory that lurks within must be absorbed without visible effort if it is to be taken without revolt. The teacher has a greater problem confronting her than ever before, but the children are inherently the same. It is environment only that has changed. [end of article]

<h3>MRS. BENDER IS NAMED PRESIDENT</h3> <p>Heads Retired Teachers Club for Coming Year; Outing Enjoyed at Park</p> <p>Mrs. Cora F. Bender was elected president of the Retired Teachers Association succeeding Mrs. Lawrence Davis yesterday at a meeting held at Jefferson Park. Others named to office include Miss Margaret Gardett, vice-president; Mrs. Thomas Jaynes, secretary-treasurer; Mrs. June Carnahan, historian; Mrs. Frances Willow, publicity chairman; Miss Ruth Williams, visiting chairman; Mrs. Emeretta Sybrant, program chairman; Mrs. A. C. Mack, parliamentarian; and Mrs. N. B. Richardson, Mrs. Martha Hampton and Mrs. A. G. Pevestorff, trustees. Plans were made to disband for this summer, resuming meetings in September. Cooling refreshments were served. Special guests were N. B. Richardson and Miss Floy Holloway. Others attending were Mrs. Margaret McElroy, secretary, and Mesdames June Carnahan, A. C. Mack, A. G. Pevestorff, Thomas Jaynes, N. B. Richardson, Frances Willow, Elizabeth Newell, Martha Hansen, Emeretta Sybrant, Dollie Taylor and Misses Margaret Gardett and Ruth Williams.</p>	<h3>Chosen Leader</h3>  <p>MRS. CORA F. BENDER, for many years principal of the Washington School here, a charter member of the Bakersfield Woman's Club, and active in the Kern County Historical Society, was honored by members of the Retired Teachers' Association by election as its president yesterday.</p>
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About Cora Bender⁵

Sixteen year-old Cora Francis McGrann graduated from Denman School at San Francisco⁶ and in 1877, ten years after the formation of Kern county, she came to teach at Walkers Basin School.⁷ She next taught at Sumner (in East Bakersfield) and then in 1879 at Greenfield. She was the teacher at Havilah in 1880 and at Beardsley in 1881, and in 1883 she taught at Caliente School.⁸ But that year Miss McGrann moved to Los Angeles to attend the University of California where she became one of seven students at the normal school.⁹ By 1888 she was back in Kern county teaching with two fellow teachers at Railroad Avenue School in Bakersfield.¹⁰

On January 1, 1888 Miss McGrann married Howard P. Bender, a painter who later founded Bakersfield Abstract Company.¹¹ In July and August 1889 Mrs. Bender was teaching at Glennville,¹² but during the next 14 years all of her time was devoted to being a wife and mother. In 1904 H.P. Bender, 44, died of typhoid fever leaving his wife and six children.¹³

Mrs. Bender returned to the classroom and taught at Emerson School when Alfred Harrell was principal. In 1910 she was named principal of Washington School in East Bakersfield, and there she served for the next 20 years. When she came to Kern county in

⁵ b 1861, Mariposa Co, California –d Jan 21, 1947, Bakersfield, California. The newspaper clipping above was pasted on p 22 of the *1936-42 Minutes Book* of the Bakersfield Chapter, California Retired Teachers Association held in the archives of that group. The author was unable to determine the publication from which the clipping came, although it was most likely from the Bakersfield Californian in May 1938.

⁶ Camille Gavin, *Dear Cora, a Personal History of Bakersfield's Early Days* (iUniverse, 2007 ISBN 978-0-595-45599-7), p 25. Cora attended Denman for two years. (*Dear Cora*, p 49)

⁷ John and Elizabeth Martha Johnson McGrann, Cora's parents, came to Bakersfield in the later 1870s, and in 1880 Mr. McGrann built a house at the southeast corner of 17th and I [Eye]. Behind it on the southwest corner resided the parents of William A. Howell. In 1891 W.A. Howell built a new house there. Today the Howell house is on the grounds of Kern County Museum. Mrs. McGrann sold her property to C.A. Maul, and from him it passed to his sister, Mrs. Juliet Shanklin. Shanklin's daughter Mrs. I.H. Glenn lived there until early 1926 at which time the house was demolished to make way for construction of the Bakersfield Californian building. See "Random Notes," Bakersfield Californian, Jan 8, 1926.

⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 22, 1947. Jul 3, 1930

⁹ The first state-run normal school on the West Coast was Minns Evening Normal School, created in 1857 to train teachers for San Francisco schools. In 1883 Cora McGrann was a member of the Junior class at state normal school, Los Angeles. (*Catalogue and Circular of the California Branch State Normal School at Los Angeles for the year ending June 15, 1883*, p 7, Sacramento, 1883. <http://books.google.com/>) Mrs. Bender recalled many years later, "Los Angeles was then just about half as big as Bakersfield is now. There were no sidewalks and it was just a little county town." (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 3, 1930)

¹⁰ *Dear Cora*. For background on Railroad Avenue School, see *Early Schools*, www.gilbertgia.com/hist_articles/school/early_schools_sch.pdf

¹¹ *Who's Who in Kern County, 1939* (Wilson & Peterson, 1940), <http://boards.ancestry.com/thread.aspx?mv=flat&m=540&p=surnames.bender>.

¹² *Dear Cora*, p 12

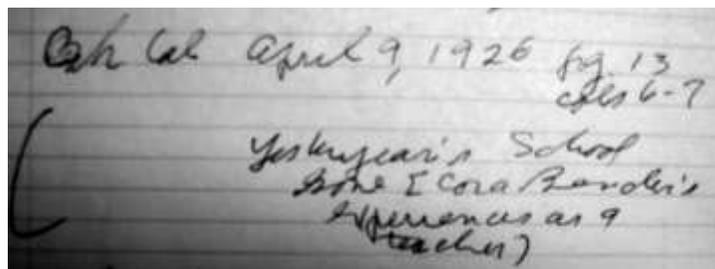
¹³ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 25, 1904. "He was a genial pleasant gentleman, a kind husband and father, and his death will be regretted by a large circle of friends." The Bender children ranged from age two to 13.

as a young girl in 1877 there were fewer than 10 schools and no more than 500 pupils. By 1926 the county had almost 100 school districts and more than 27,000 pupils.¹⁴ Wrote the Californian, “She has taught scores of now-prominent residents of Bakersfield how to read and write, and paddled some of them for good measure when law and order of the schoolroom had to be maintained.”¹⁵

Mrs. Bender was a charter member of the Bakersfield Woman’s Club, first president of the Bakersfield City School Principal Club, an active member of the Kern County Historical Society,¹⁶ president of the Bakersfield Chapter, Californian Retired Teachers Association,¹⁷ and an honored, lifetime member of the California Teachers Association. Cora F. Bender impacted thousands of lives.

Post Script

Some years ago while I was perusing Dr. Harland Boyd’s notebooks I found the citation below which is in his handwriting.¹⁸ Dr. Boyd had read Virginia Reed’s interview with Cora Bender and saw it as an important bit of history. At the time I photographed the note I suspected it would lead to an interesting story. It did.



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¹⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Apr 9, 1926

¹⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 3, 1930

¹⁶ Bender was financial secretary in 1931-32 when Alfred Harrell was president. In 1932-34 she was recording secretary.

¹⁷ Bakersfield Chapter, California Retired Teachers Association, *Minutes Book, Nov 18, 1937*: “We are pleased to note that Mrs. Cora F. Bender has been appointed a member of the state board of directors of the California Retired Teachers Association.” This was also reported in the Bakersfield Californian, Nov 23, 1937. Mrs. Bender’s campaign in the 1930s for a seat on the Bakersfield city council was unsuccessful.

¹⁸ William Harland Boyd. *Collected research papers on Kern County history*. 150 volumes. McGuire Local History Room, Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, California