



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Our Little SP Rental House on Kentucky Street

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By Frank Kent Rogers

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During World War II my father worked for the Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Company in Fort Worth, Texas where he helped build B-24 "Liberator" bombers. Knowing that his job would be abolished when the war ended, and evidently being tired of Texas, he put my mother and sister and me into a 1936 Chevrolet and headed westward to see if he might find a job in the shipyards of Oakland, California.

We had some adventures along the way, including seeing dive bombers dropping live bombs into the Mojave Desert and sending clouds of dust and pieces of cacti fly into the air. According to my mother this was the occasion for my uttering my first complete sentence, which was "Go down, drop bombs!" My father had an uncle who lived in Bakersfield, so we stopped there. I don't remember it, of course, but my parents told me that when we were on the way out of town they stopped at a gas station on the traffic circle and got coffee at a little café next door. While we were sitting there, news came over the radio that the Japanese were asking for peace terms.

We drove on to Oakland, where my parents spent the night in abject terror barring the door of the motel room against drunken revelers who wanted to come in and party. We left at dawn and returned to Bakersfield where we stopped at the same café as before. We were sitting there when the news came over the radio that the Japanese had surrendered and the war was over. There was a flurry of horn honking and cheering.

My father shortly found work as a machinist for the Southern Pacific in Bakersfield, and there we stayed. Housing was hard to find, but the Southern Pacific provided rental housing near the shops on Kentucky Street. We had the house nearest the railroad tracks, and the sound of trains rolling past was one of my earliest memories. I don't recall that the noise ever bothered any of us or

prevented us from sleeping, although my parents may have felt differently. That is where my family lived for a couple of years after our arrival. The houses had grass lawns and flowers, and I never imagined that anyone lived in a nicer place than I did. There were lots of kids to play with.



Bakersfield Californian, March 28, 1953

The row of flat-topped, probably prefabricated houses started where Williams Street crossed the railroad tracks and extended down to the ice house that in those days made ice for Southern Pacific freight cars. I really don't remember much about the house itself. Obviously, the roof was flat over our heads. There was a small kitchenette, which was actually a corner of the living room, but the bedrooms were separate from the living room. The electrical outlets must have been rudimentary and all too accessible to a curious child, since I was able to shock myself by touching an outlet in the living room over the couch, which knocked me onto my back and set my whole small body shaking. My parents found my description of the event, which was mostly a full-body pantomime on my part with all the shaking I could generate, quite amusing, and they delighted in asking me to show visitors what the experience was like.

My only strong memory of the inside the house is the visit from the rather hard woman who stopped by regularly to either collect rent or to see how the property was bearing up. Evidently, she was a hard-drinking gal, and when my mother, mindful of the summer heat, courteously asked if she would like a drink, her eyes lit up and she replied "Yeah!" with a huge smile. Imagine her disappointment when my mother went to the sink and drew a glass of water, which the hard-faced woman waved away with disgust.

Certainly the flimsy construction suggests that they were not intended for long-term occupation. With regard to reinforced cardboard being used in the

construction of the houses, that sounds altogether plausible to me, since the walls were paper thin, and sounds carried easily from one house to the next.¹

The people who lived directly across from us were a family headed by a thin, white-haired, rheumy-eyed man who had sired more children than he could count. One afternoon those children in their multitudes were raising quite racket in the front yard of their little place. Their next door neighbor was the sociopathic man with whom my father would ultimately have a fist fight. Hearing the racket, which included quite a bit of howling, he came out his front door and shouted to the thin, rheumy-eyed man, "What are you raising over there, a pack of dogs?" Rheumy didn't fancy a fistfight with the big, mean man so replied "Hell, I don't know!"

As soon as we were settled in our new home my parents began to explore Bakersfield and the surrounding countryside My favorite activity was driving to the Tehachapi Loop for train watching and a picnic There was no freeway in those days (1946) but only a winding, two-lane road that offered quite a few places to pull off the road and spread a picnic blanket. My parents named their favorite place "our valley," and I really imagined that it belonged to us! We even laughed about the ants that almost always appeared to share the food.



A section crew at the Loop, Dad's picture

¹ Gilbert Gia interview with Minnie Molinaro, Apr 19, 2003: "We lived on Monterey Street by Margaret Torigiani. Housing was in critical shortage during WWII. Down town on 16th Street the portable SP houses that faced the Santa Fe railroad were put up by Joe Gannon. After the war the Paddock family moved them out to Lamont for rentals. On Kentucky Street just west of the SP ice house were some more 12- by 20-foot cabins. One bedroom, maybe a bath. There were about fifteen of them." Gilbert Gia interview with Millie Giddings Gia Munding, Feb 5, 2008: "The Paddock family was the builder who put the addition on my father's house on Oregon Street. After WWII the Paddock son who was a carpenter bought some little government houses that were adjacent to Minter Field and moved them near Morning Drive and Edison Highway." Email from George Gilbert Lynch to Gilbert Gia, Nov 1, 2003: "Those houses were on S.P. property so they were called the S.P. homes. Six of them were trailers and were moved to the Mojave rail yards just east of the old depot there. When I worked as a swingman for the ATSF from 1957 to 1969, I slept many times in one of them. The trailer that we all used the most had a TV and stove and couch just like home. Amazingly, those trailers were mostly glued paper in plies, and they stayed together very well over the years. They were not needed after 1964 and were all burned up." Gilbert Gia interview with John Papasergia, Jun 6, 2003: "Just east of Haley next to the tracks were the houses that the S.P. brought in during the war for employees. The houses had toilets and showers, were white with flat roofs and had plywood on the outside. All that is left of them is a plaster building, which was the office north across the street. It was later a day care center."



Dad, me, Mom at the Loop. Maybe Mrs. Groins took the picture.

Across Kentucky Street from the rental housing was a row of very old houses that were occupied mostly by Italian families, and many of the men worked for the SP just as my father did. Gino & Tony's market stood on Kentucky Street almost at the corner of Haley. My father shopped there several times a week, and I went along for a soft drink from one of those wonderful old coolers that were filled with near-freezing water. It left the glass bottles icy cold and wet and dripping everywhere. Lots of railroad men shopped there, and I remember some of the colorful greetings that they exchanged with my father, especially the tall man who, if two or more people were present, would intone solemnly, "John Bunning is my name, and Ireland is my nation." Later, another store was built nearby that belonged to Al and was simply named Al's Store. I can't remember everything that Al sold, but I know that he sold evaporative coolers. I had a great-uncle who was a jack of all trades and got a job with Al installing those coolers. He paid me a dollar a cooler to help install them, which entailed one of us climbing up onto the roof of a house and holding a long, expansible ladder that we used to pull and push the cooler up onto the roof. My great-uncle was near sixty years of age, and I was thirteen, and while this procedure may sound simple, it involved sweating and panting in the hot sun.

Haley Street was the main entrance to the railroad yard, and my mother and I used to park as close to the gate as we could when we picked up my father at the end of his shift. There lots of eucalyptus trees there that provided shade, and one exciting day the National Guard had an exercise that included two jeep-loads of soldiers who set up a .50-caliber machine gun near the front gate. I thought that was great entertainment!

Farther to the east was the ice house where the canal crossed under Kentucky Street. I must have been permitted to wander freely in the company of my older sister, since I remember passing by the ice house where I could hear the steady, companionable patter of Spanish coming from the workmen who wielded spear-like steel rods to grab and hold the blocks of ice and muscle them into the receiving bins atop the freight cars. I remember that "wham-bam-bam" almighty racket that the blocks made sliding and banging down the chutes into the freight

cars. In the heat of the summer I loved to imagine how cold it must be inside right next to those blocks of ice.

A house at the northeast corner of Kentucky and Williams streets sat on a very large lot that was completely overgrown with trees, shrubs, and vines. This property reminded me of the jungles through which Johnny Weissmuller swung with his little chimp friend, Cheetah, in those Tarzan movies that I occasionally got to see at the Granada Theater. The house was owned by a woman who had either adopted or was caring for a boy my age who was named "Buster." How I got permission to run through this real-life jungle I can't recall, but I know that I did, and I thought it was wonderful!



The Williams House at Williams and Kentucky Streets, cleared and ready to be demolished, 2016. Williams helped provide building sites for Washington, Lincoln, and Williams schools.

I should mention that the houses along the south side of Kentucky Street, for several city blocks to the east of the ice house, were called "Little Mexico" by the Southern Pacific employees, since this is where most of the ice house workmen lived. In that long-ago, Anglo-dominated Bakersfield, the local trains that carried milk and mail to outlying communities around Bakersfield were called "milk trains" or "the M, M, and M," which stood for "Milk, Mail, and Mexicans," presumably to denote the preponderance of Spanish-speaking employees who staffed them.

There was a canal that ran under Kentucky Street very close to the ice house, and we sometimes swam in that water to escape the summer heat. All of the kids who lived within walking distance swam there, but the Latinos usually swam in the part of the canal that was southeast of Kentucky Street while the Anglos gathered on the other side, the north side of the street. I remember that on one occasion a mother brought her children from "Little Mexico" to the canal and with a bar of soap washed them in the canal, since presumably they had no running water in the house where they lived. My family spoke no Spanish – except to count from one to ten – and most of the Spanish speakers probably spoke no English, so we silently co-existed when we visited the canal.

Among my other memories of life in the Southern Pacific rentals is how good was the smell of meat cooking during the cold winter months while I played outside before dinner. Another was of the evening that some older kids, who were probably twelve or thirteen years of age, decided to sleep outside on the lawn (this must have been during the spring or fall when the weather was mild) and told me I could stay with them if I wanted to. I loved wrapping up in the quilts that they brought out of their houses as substitutes for sleeping bags (who could afford those?), but when "the evening dews and dampness" began to fall on my face, I decided to trot inside nearer my parents and my warm bed. I felt bad about giving up on the sleep-out until I was told the following day that the older kids, too, had thought better about spending the night out in the damp and had likewise trotted off to bed like civilized folk.



Me about the time we moved there. The tracks are behind me.

It was about this time in my life that I discovered comic books, which I thought were wonderful except for the spooky drawings that appeared in some of them. I have forgotten the designation of the comics, but they were sufficiently gory to draw the ire of the U.S. Congress, and they were subsequently outlawed for fear of poisoning the minds of little snits like me.

My father sometimes took me with him to the railroad yards where he washed his grease-stained work clothes. This he accomplished by hanging them on a steel hook and lowering it into a tank of black, evil-looking liquid that must have been an industrial-grade solvent that partially dissolved the grease on the clothes before he put them into the steam cleaner that was approximately three feet long, two feet wide, and two feet high. It made a horrendous noise when my father twisted a round valve to open the steam line and blast the clothes clean. I always covered my ears when he did this, since the noise was painful.

Somewhere near the steam cleaner was a narrow building that housed instruments of various kinds that presumably enabled the men to monitor steam pressures and other things in the railroad yard. There was also a small steel building that my father said had been a bomb shelter during World War II. If so, it

must have been a gesture by the Southern Pacific to remind the employees that the nation was at war, since it wasn't large enough to shelter many people, nor did it look substantial enough to provide real protection against bomb blasts.

Another memory of my visits to the railroad yards was seeing a lathe, of the type that my father used as a machinist. It had been manufactured in 1865! My father said that despite its age, it still enabled machinists to produce the kind of parts needed to maintain steam locomotives.

Those things were interesting to me, but the most amusing thing I associate with visits to the railroad yards occurred one day as my father and I were driving west on Kentucky Street toward the yards and saw a medium-sized, open-bed truck ahead of us carrying very large cylinders of compressed air or some other gas. One of the cylinders jarred loose from the truck's bed and fell off, and the top of the cylinder hit the pavement and the cap knocked off. The gas in the cylinder must have been under very high pressure, since its sudden escape propelled the cylinder past the truck like a rocket, and it ricocheted from one curb to another for a good distance until finally coming to rest in the gutter. My father and I were laughing our heads off, but the truck driver, who stopped to retrieve the cylinder, did not appear to be amused.

On another occasion, when I was riding with my mother, the laugh was on us. We were westbound on Kentucky Street and had just crossed the canal next to the ice house when we were hit by another car that my mother decided to pass just as the driver made a left turn into the ice house driveway. We finished up with our Studebaker's nose down in the shrubbery that grew alongside the street. I got a pretty good sized bump on my forehead after slamming into the windshield but sustained no serious injuries. I remember that the other driver was a florid-faced redhead. By coincidence, the insurance adjuster who came to our house after the accident had almost exactly the same complexion, hair color, and features as the other redhead but was some twenty years older. We were very suspicious of him and demanded to see his corporate identity cards before we would speak with him about the accident.

Things I remember learning while living in the Southern Pacific rentals: Bees sting, electric sockets shock, and some people are friendly but others not. Our next-door neighbors were Cherokees from Oklahoma, Jim and Gladys Goins and Gladys' mother. They had a son named Bill and a daughter named Ada Bell. Ada's middle name, Bell, was the surname of her grandmother, who was not a Cherokee but an Anglo who had a very fair complexion, much fairer than my own olive complexion tanned by the Bakersfield sun. Jim was a very kind, hard working man who was loved by his family and liked by everyone. When he wasn't working as a section hand, he loved to hunt and fish. Happily my father enjoyed the same things, and although Jim was perhaps twenty years older than my dad, they soon began to go fishing almost every weekend, and they took me along. I was a bouncy, noisy kid, so it says a lot about Jim's patience that he not only tolerated me but taught me to fish and probably taught my father a few things as well. One

windy day, we were fishing in the Friant-Kern Canal, and my straw, cowboy hat blew off and into the canal. Jim did an easy cast with his fishing rod and hooked the hat and reeled it in for me. I was amazed and thought that he was a wizard.

Gladys was a round, motherly woman who accepted my boisterous behavior just as graciously as her husband did. She was an excellent cook, and whenever she worked in the kitchen, I followed her about in anticipation of getting something tasty to eat. If she baked a cake, I got to lick the wooden spoon that she used to whip the cake mix. Once when she was whipping the mix, I stuck my face so close to the bowl that she accidentally splashed some into my face. She was apologetic and reached for a towel to clean my face, but I used my fingers to shove the mix into my mouth and swallow it before she could wipe it off. Then I asked her to do it again, which she thought extremely funny.

We were fortunate to have such a loving family next door, since some of the other residents weren't friendly at all. One of them was the huge man who lived across from us and one door down, and he had a reputation for drinking and fighting with other men at the SP. I had been warned to stay away from him, but being between two and three years old, I forgot. I don't remember any of the events that followed my trespass onto his lawn, but evidently he spanked me very hard, and he and my father had a fist fight. Doubtless this was why my parents moved away, first to Roseville, a neighborhood of Sacramento, and finally back to Bakersfield, where my father bought land on Hill Street in East Bakersfield and built the little house that we lived in until my freshman year in high school.

Leaving the Southern Pacific rental housing didn't end our friendship with the Goins family, though. After my mother became a licensed vocational nurse in 1952, she insisted that I stay with "Mama Goins" during the evenings when she and my father were at work. Many times I went with Jim after school to hunt rabbits, which Gladys cooked for our dinner. Sometimes dinner was bread and gravy, which I loved. On Sunday evenings, I attended services with them, even though our families belonged to different churches. After I went away to college and work in another town, my mother frequently wrote that Mrs. Goins had asked about me.

My parents and Jim and Gladys Goins lie buried not twenty-five feet apart in the Hillcrest Memorial Park on Niles Street near Morning Drive. The last time that I saw where I used to live, the property was only a dusty yard filled with pieces of railroad equipment and looked like any other junkyard, but it lives on in my memories of a childhood that, despite humble circumstances, included many warm and happy days.

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