



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California  
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## Underground Bakersfield

Ver 6

by Gilbert P. Gia

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**You might have heard about the tunnel under Bakersfield High School that snakes north to downtown or about the shooting range under East Bakersfield High gym. If those don't sound familiar then how about the Cellar Bar tunnel under old Brock's or the secret Chinese tunnels? Stories like that have been around for generations. Some are true.**

**The 1898 Hay Building on 19th Street, like many other brick structures, was built with a full basement to provide extra storage space. As years passed, those emporiums were subdivided into smaller businesses, and because each needed storage, the basements were compartmentalized. As business came and went, new basement doors were added, old ones boarded-up, and partitions moved. Visitors today who see those passages always call them tunnels.**

**Some older basements extend under public sidewalks, which are suggested by horizontal metal doors beneath your feet.<sup>1</sup> They once allowed access to the below-grade corridors housing water, gas, electric, and telephone utilities.<sup>2</sup> Those spaces are more like tunnels than partitioned basements, but sidewalk caverns are really nothing compared to Kern County's authentic tunnels.**

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<sup>1</sup> See Bakersfield Sidewalks and Curbs, 1893-2011, <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/community1.html>

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to both Michael Beckwith and Arnold Ramirez of Bakersfield for this information.



Southern Hotel, an example of an early building with full basement

**Around 1875 the Southern Pacific hired Chinese work crews to constructed 18 hard-rock tunnels in the mountains between Bakersfield and Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> Ordinary pay for the Chinese workers was \$26 per month, which was equivalent to about \$550 a month in 2010 dollars. In spring 1875, track crews struck for \$31 a month,**

FATAL EXPLOSION.—On Saturday last while the men were tamping a blas. containing five kegs of powder, on the railroad in the Tehache-pi Pass, a premature explosion occurred, killing the foreman and one other white man, and two Chinamen. Eleven Chinese were seriously wounded, some with their legs and arms broken, and others burned in a fearful manner. The wounded were taken into Caliente on Monday. One of the white men had his arm blown entirely out of sight, and it has not yet been found. About 50 Chinese refused farther work. Two of their number were killed with giant powder in tunnel No. 5 last week.

Southern [Bakersfield] Californian, Apr 6, 1876

**Their great tunneling accomplishment is historically important because it took Bakersfield off the list of backwater towns. Stephen Montgomery of Bakersfield supplies this history about those tunnels:**

<sup>3</sup> Southern [Bakersfield] Californian, Apr 4, 1875.

**“There were originally 16 tunnels between Bakersfield and Tehachapi. They were numbered one through 17 –the number 13 was not used. After the flood of 1884 washed out the tracks between Pampa, now Bena, and Caliente at the bottom of the grade, the Southern Pacific rerouted its track to a higher elevation necessitating another tunnel west of Tunnel 1. Because by this time the other tunnels had already been completed and were in use, the new tunnel was called Tunnel ½.**

**“Here are the tunnels remaining today and some history about the ones that are no longer part of the route: Still in use are Tunnels 1 and 2 between Caliente and Bealville, and Tunnels 3 and 5 between Bealville and Cliff. <sup>4</sup> Most of Tunnel 4 collapsed during the 1952 quake. The tracks were run beside it, leaving the abandoned tunnel to serve as a retaining wall. Tunnel 5 also had a partial collapse at the west end, and they built a temporary shoofly around it. Its curves, 14 and 15 percent, were so tight it made negotiating it difficult. It took several months to repair Tunnel 5 allowing the shoofly to be abandoned. Unlike the other tunnels that have concrete forms made from 10-inch boards, the concrete work at the west end of Tunnel 5 was formed with plywood and a portion of the west end has its tracks supported by a concrete floor over an open fissure.<sup>5</sup>**

**“The next existing tunnel is Number 8. It is the only one not lined with concrete but instead has exposed rock in the passage. Tunnel 9 goes under the tracks at Walong siding at The Loop. Tunnel 10 is immediately south of siding Walong. Tunnel 12 was not much more than a glorified arch cut through a quartz strata and was daylighted shortly after it was built. Next are four closely spaced tunnels, 14 through 17 between Marcel siding and station Cable. That makes a total of 11 tunnels still in service. The carrier has plans to remove Tunnel 10 between Marcel and Walong and even remove the four close tunnels and connect Marcel to Cable with double track.**

**“The information above is from *Southern Pacific-Santa Fe Tehachapi* by John R. Signor (Golden West Books, 1983) and *Southern Pacific Transportation Company, San Joaquin Division, Timetable and Special Instructions effective September 15, 1974*. I made minor corrections and added details.**

**“The dates embossed on the portals reflect the date of their lining or installation of portals of concrete, but not the tunnels’ actual completion. Signor refers to Tunnel 4 as being daylighted. It was not. It was bypassed. The south end today is covered with soil, and the north end has been walled up with steel and Shotcrete, sometimes referred to as gunite, to prevent entry. That portion of the mountain next to the tunnel is unstable, and a major**

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<sup>4</sup>From Caliente at the bottom of the grade, the sidings to Tehachapi are Allard, Bealville, Cliff, Rowen, Woodford, Walong, and Marcel. –Gilbert Gia. Stephen Montgomery: “Cable is not a siding. It’s a station point at a controlled switch where the track becomes multiple main line. In this case that’s two tracks where trains can be run in either direction on either track by signal indication controlled by the CTC dispatcher. Multiple main is in effect between Cable and Tehachapi. From Tehachapi to Cameron with other rules in effect from Cameron to South Mojave.”

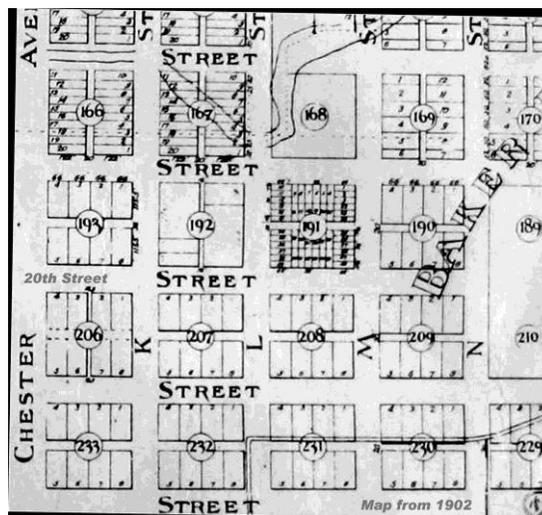
<sup>5</sup> On May 14, 1915, sparks from an engine set fire to shoring timbers in Tunnel 15, and three weeks passed before rail traffic restarted. After the 1952 earthquake, trains along this part of the line were idled for a month, and Highway 99 to Los Angeles was day-and-night solid trucks. –Gilbert Gia

seismic event could cause more problems for this portion of the track and for Tunnel 3.

“The remaining tunnels are south of Palmdale. They are Tunnels 18 and 19 in Soledad Canyon and the long Tunnel 25, also known at the Newhall Tunnel.”<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the Bakersfield area, North-of-the-River has a road tunnel (a longish underpass really) that's fun to drive through, and it's lighted. In 1983 Kern County lowered that part of Seventh Standard Road to extend Meadow's Field runway. The tunnel is just long enough to give your horn a good test before you emerge into the sunlight at the other side.

Stories about Chinese tunnels go back to the early days of Bakersfield, and those were real. Until the 1960s, residential covenants denied Chinese the right to own property outside Bakersfield's two Chinatown ghettos. On the map below, Block 191 suggests that individual residential lots in old Chinatown were about one-sixth the size of that elsewhere. Seventeen-and-a-half-foot lots meant cramped residential living.



Old Chinatown in Block 191. Sanborn Fire Map, 1902

Before coolers and air conditioning, a good night's sleep meant a bed in the basement. Houses in Chinatown often had two front entrances: A flight of stairs leading up to the main floor, and a second, short flight of stairs leading down to the basement. By 1901, metal chimneys poking up in front and back of houses indicated that the basement rooms were also used in winter months.

<sup>6</sup> Emails between Stephen Montgomery and Gilbert Gia, Jul 2012

**Underground living provided a measure of safety and convenience, and for that reason neighboring basements were connected by passageways. In 1903 lawmen searching for outlaw Jim McKinney surrounded the Chinese Joss House on L Street. After a short firefight, McKinney was shot down, but his friend Al Hulse somehow escaped. Newspapers speculated that he'd fled through a tunnel.<sup>7</sup>**

**Any doubts about the existence of Chinatown tunnels were dispelled in September 1904 after a fire burned-out nearly one-fourth of Chinatown exposing a labyrinth of tunnels and passages east of K Street and west of L. Some of them had brick walls, and one even led to an iron-gated, underground vault. The day after the fire a Chinese merchant was seen retrieving a safe from a smoldering, burned-out passage.<sup>8</sup>**

**In April 1922 Bakersfield police conducted a "tunnel raid" on a gambling den at 720 18th Street in Chinatown. The *Californian* reported that most of the players there eluded capture by escaping though a tunnel, although that tunnel was probably a passageway into the basement of an adjacent house.<sup>9</sup>**

**In 1945 Richard Rose returned to civilian life and took a job with a pest control company. The day he called on the owner of a Chinese restaurant who wanted his basement fumigated, Rose discovered that the work also included fumigating a brick tunnel under the restaurant. Perhaps it was one of the tunnels Mary Ming mentioned in a 1976 interview when she recalled that after the 1952 earthquake some Chinatown tunnels caved in.<sup>10</sup>**

**Bakersfield tunnel stories were helped along over the years by talk about the tunnels in Taft's Chinatown,<sup>11</sup> but tunnel legends seem to have a sustaining life of their own. They haven't been much in public news lately, but in June 2012 I received an email from Paul Milazzo who told me that in the early 1950s he'd seen the basement of the Chinese Joss House at 22nd and L Streets.**

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph E. Doctor, *Shotguns on Sunday*, Westernlore Press, Los Angeles, California, 1958, p 183. Harold L. Edwards, *The Killing of Jim McKinney*. Edwards Book Co., Porterville, California, 1988, p 106; Washington [DC] Times, April 20, 1903

<sup>8</sup> Morning Echo, Sep 10, 1904

<sup>9</sup> Police activity continued. See article in the July 24, 1922 *Bakersfield Californian*.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Ming was 1979-80 president of the Kern County Historical Society.

<sup>11</sup> *Early Days in Taft*. West Kern Oil Museum, Inc. S & S Printing, Taft, California, (undated, not paginated). Collected articles from *The Pumper*, the quarterly newsletter of the West Kern Oil Museum, Taft, California, p 7: "The old G&C Café on south side of Center Street was hooked up to the underground network which extended to Main Street and up to the Fox Hotel at Fourth and Main. Charlie Lowe was the 'mayor' of Chinatown. They had lottery games downstairs." [Quote is from "A South Taft Neighborhood" by Murray Eiland, Judge of the Taft Judicial District, 1947-1966. According to Don Arnot of the Kern County Historical Society, Judge Eiland's description implies that the tunnels extended about two blocks.



Bakersfield Joss House about 1910

**Milazzo wrote, "Going back to 1960, and up, my buddy Wayne Castle and I dug up Kern County one shovel at a time looking for old bottles and buried history. Digging around old dump sites, camps, and buildings we were chasing rumors from books and newspapers thinking we would hit a pot of gold one day. Many of those rumors fizzled out, but we were young and strong and kept our picks and shovels sharp."**

**"Chinese history was always interesting, and it led us to Lake Isabella and the flumes that ran the powerhouses. We learned where the camps were along those routes and found more junk than value, but each item was a treasure to us --how an item ended up where it did and what it was. We always found silverware, cups, and broken glass at the camps' dump sites. Some bottles and plates were still in one piece exactly where someone had set them down, and there they'd stayed for years. Now and then we found old pocket watches, ruined by moisture but still interesting."**

**"After the earthquake of 1952 the two-story Chinese Joss House at 22nd and L Street was abandoned. Behind it on the east was a staircase and a small, fenced-in backyard, and we figured we could dig there unseen by passing traffic. We agreed to meet the next morning at daylight with our shovels."**

**"We turned that yard upside down but only found a couple wine bottles from present-day winos. We decided to try the back door. With a little ingenuity it popped open, and behind it was a stairway leading down to a basement. Those stairs were dark and dusty and really didn't look like anyone had walked on them in years, but we went in. After our eyes became used to the dark we realized that we were in a**

gambling room. Several bamboo chairs were arranged around a large, round table, and strewn here and there were glasses and dozens of little bottles that looked like miniature, two-inch wine bottles. We found out later they were opium bottles. (Later, all mine shattered when I set them out in the sun.)”

“A large safe was parked against a wall. I opened it by simply turning the handle, and inside saw old, cloth bags. They felt quite heavy, and about then we were seeing dollar signs and couldn't wait to dump them out on the table. What poured out were different sized gambling tokens, mostly of brass but some of pressed cardboard marked “Democrat, Bakersfield Ca.”<sup>12</sup> Our big grins became questions as we stacked-up the tokens to split them between us. As for the brass ones, we flipped, and I lost.”



Milazzo's gaming tokens from the Joss House

“A low, dark tunnel led off to the south but looked dangerous. Not having lights we determined to come back the following Saturday to do more exploring, but the next Saturday was too late. Construction equipment was parked on the lot, and the building was mostly leveled.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “In the 1940s, my uncle and my aunt had a gambling house down on L Street. ... It was called Democrat. I think it was on the alley between 19th and 20th on the east side of the street.” —Galen Chow. *The Chinese of Kern County, 1857-1960*, William Harland Boyd. Kern County Historical Society, Bakersfield, California (2002), p 127

<sup>13</sup> Email to Gilbert Gia from Paul Milazzo, July, 2012

**Milazzo's adventure in the 70+ year-old basement probably took place in May 1953. On May 26, 1953 work started for the \$50,000 Ying Ming Hall, and on November 15, 1953 the building was dedicated by the Ying-On Association.<sup>14</sup>**



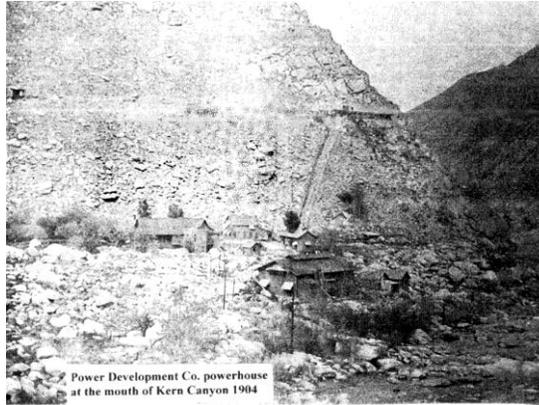
Ying On Benevolent Association Building, July 2012. China Alley is at arrow between 20th and 21st Streets.

**Moving on to other underground sites, how about the 1-1/2-mile tunnel that only a few moderns have seen? In 1908 the hydroelectric plant at the mouth of Kern Canyon started producing electricity for Bakersfield. Several miles up river, water had been diverted from the river into a culvert, and in the last 8,580 feet of its journey to the power plant the water passed through a hard-rock tunnel.<sup>15</sup> When that tunnel is serviced, passersby usually are startled by a plume of water shooting from the mountainside and falling hundreds of feet into the river below.**

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<sup>14</sup> Bakersfield Californian, May 27, Nov 11, 1953. Building plans by engineer George Parker, building construction by Tobisch & Colombo. Yin-On officers in 1953 were Thomas Key, Harry Gee, El Jeong, and George N. Kimm. Building committee members were Thomas Key, Jack Chow, Lee Hong Sing, Charles Ping, George Jung, and George N. Kimm. Bakersfield Californian, Nov 16, 1953. The Bakersfield Californian reported on May 27, 1953 that "several years ago" Suey-On and Sun Suey Ying combined to form the Ying-On Association.

<sup>15</sup> See George Gilbert Lynch, *Bakersfield's Hydroelectric Plant*, Historic Kern, Fall 2005. <http://wwwstatic.kern.org/gems/historicalSociety/Vol553Fall.pdf>



Kern Canyon Powerhouse, 1904. Tunnel's terminus is half-way up mountainside

**Near Randsburg, around 1900, William Henry "Burro" Schmidt started digging his own, personal tunnel, and in 1938 he completed his 1,872-ft passage through Black Mountain. The 32-year task still holds Kern County's record for the longest tunnel dug by one person.**

**Out on Taft Highway during World War II the Army Corp of Engineers excavated pits for the Army Air Corp to conceal its aircraft from Japanese bombers, which thankfully never flew over California. Today those once-camouflaged depressions are nothing more than curiously-low areas by the road.**

**Bakersfield High School's *Blue and White* of April 1, 1942 humorously described a rounded, concrete vault in the east corner of Elm Grove as a bomb shelter: "A tunnel runs both ways from the vault, west to the boiler room and east to the cellar under the stage of the new auditorium." The paper said that students over 180 pounds were not allowed.**

**In the 1950s Kern County Museum displayed a family-sized bomb-shelter. If a visitor wanted one, a dealership in East Bakersfield would oblige. Local TV and radio personalities attached themselves to the bomb-shelter craze. For two weeks in fall 1961 Don Rodewald broadcasted a radio show from a family bomb-shelter, and some in the listening audience later marveled at how Rodewald and his wife could spend 14 continuous days together in such a confined space. Do-it-yourselfers, too, were part of the frenzy to have a backyard shelter. A father at McKittrick fired up his backhoe, and buried a railroad boxcar as a safe retreat from nuclear attack.**

**Here at Bakersfield, citizens who didn't care to dig up their backyards were invited to dine on Government crackers and drink canned water if an emergency came. Shelters were under Civic Center, Kern County Jail, Kress Building, Woolworths, JC Penney's, Brocks, and the Bakersfield College library. In 1970 the**

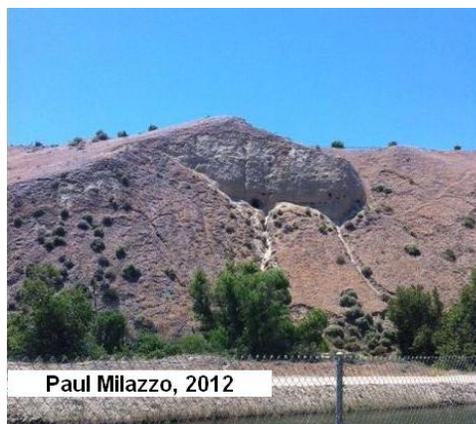
**town of Boron completed a much more ambitious community project. In January the *Boron Enterprise* reported that a completely outfitted, 200-bed emergency hospital had been built in the nearby borax mine.**

**Generations of Bakersfield youth have descended the bluffs below River Boulevard and Panorama Drive in search of fabled Bat Cave—and knowledge of that name alone is a reliable measure of how long a person has lived in East Bakersfield. When viewed from below the bluffs, Bat Cave is little more than a mouse hole, which is probably why few have explored it. Want to visit? Below is Paul Milazzo’s image of Bat Cave and directions to it. Further below, Milazzo adds a bonus: Eagle Cave.**



Bat Cave, upper left

**Milazzo: “This shot [above] shows Bat Cave trail and the three palms at River Boulevard parking lot in the background. If you drop off the trail from there, just follow the dirt road east approximately 300 yards to get to the cave. The entrance is kind of hidden, but it’s easy to walk to.”**



## Eagle Cave

**“Eagle Cave is about 300 yards east of Bat Cave and is much higher and harder to reach from below. The two trails shown here on either side lead to the top at the end of Haley Street near the northwest corner of Bakersfield College. These caves were known by the older boys when I was a kid in 1940.”<sup>16</sup>**

**This author recalls a tunnel from the late 1940s at the Kern County Sheriff’s Pistol Range. Its present range borders Hart Park’s west entrance, but in the 1940s and 1950s the range was in the box canyon just above the present site. A tunnel connected its firing line to 25- and 50-yard targets, and halfway into that tunnel was a low-ceilinged storage room. The images below were taken in 2003 when the tunnel’s entrance was nearly filled with dirt.**



Tunnel entrance shown at black arrow, Hart Park in distance

<sup>16</sup> Email to Gilbert Gia from Paul Milazzo, July, 2012

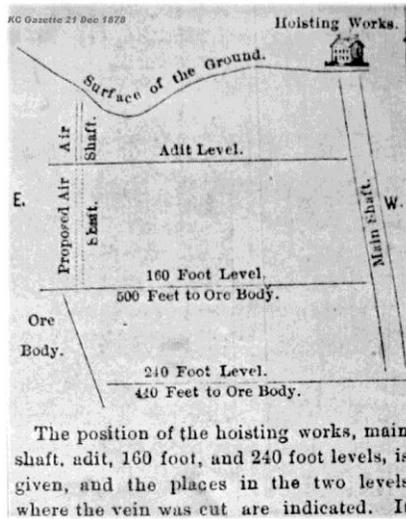


Shooting range tunnel entrance  
(Images, Gilbert Gia, 2003)

**Elementary school students have also used tunnels. Standard School tunnel crossed under North Chester Avenue, and old Union Avenue School's was just north of today's Truxtun Avenue overpass. The only evidence of the latter tunnel is a rectangular, concrete curbing in front of a donut shop.**

**When Baker Street was paved in 1911, a narrow bridge was built over Eastside Canal. Years later that part of the canal between King and Kern Streets was bridged so completely that at first glance one would never suspect a canal was there. The watery "tunnel" became a dark, murky, pre-Indiana Jones adventure for neighborhood kids. About 1950 this author's fun came to an end when the city installed a six-foot safety fence on both sides of the canal.**

**Most of the full-fledged, real tunnels in this county are unknown. Hard-rock mining started in earnest after the Kern River Gold Rush of 1851, and over passing years miners received more than 600 gold-mine patents. The most famous of the larger mines is the Yellow Aster near Randsburg, which by 1905 boasted 7-1/2 miles of horizontal tunnels. Another, the Blue-Sumner, had about 10,000 feet, and the Keys Mine 6,000. Those represent but a small fraction of mostly-forgotten mining tunnels, and because Kern County encompasses 8,170 square miles, it's safe to say that hundreds of miles of dark tunnels await adventurers. On the other hand, the inexperienced probably should not go looking; many dark shafts drop straight down more than 200 feet.**



Blue-Sumner Mine, Kern County Gazette, December 21, 1872

**If you'd be satisfied with just a peek at a hard-rock tunnel, how about seeing one by car? The hard-rock tunnel that's about a minute or so into Kern Canyon was used in the 1920s to store dynamite. That tunnel goes in only about 20 feet so it's okay to share the information, but try stretching the truth a little. Everybody else does.**

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