



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

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Bashing Bakersfield

A Look Back: 1873-1922

By Gilbert P. Gia

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Tonight Show host Johnny Carson dropped B-bombs on Bakersfield in the 1980s, but by that time newspapers had long bruised the town's image. What was the scolding about?

Let's start with the flies. Bakersfield had incorporated in 1898,¹ but even by 1910 the town council had not passed basic ordinances to control manure pits and open garbage dumps.² A 1911 letter describing the pestilence of flies and mosquitos concluded with the words, "I have also seen several decomposed animals covered with thousands of flies. I have passed up the back alleys where open toilets abound and the tens of thousands of files have made things hum when disturbed. I passed along our principal thoroughfares and disturbed the thousands of flies covering the freshly dropped horse manure. I have met with the offensive chicken yards where the tens of thousand of flies swarm."³

Other challenges were the summer heat, a tar-and-feathering,⁴ several vigilante hangings,⁵ rigged town elections,⁶ and the red-light district.⁷ "This town, or its name rather," a reporter wrote in 1882, "has become almost proverbial as the home of the gambler and sportsman. Horse racing, foot-racing and dog fighting are the everyday amusements, and at night time the gambling houses and dance halls are in full blast."⁸ Bakersfield's Tenderloin metastasized for the next two decades, but growing appeal of the Progressive Movement spawned ordinances that nudged Bakersfield prostitution behind curtained windows. Although those laws often went unenforced, passage in 1913 of the California Red-Light Abatement ultimately obliged the red-light businesses to retreat to the second and third floors of downtown hotels.⁹

Bakersfield understood the negative stories on newspaper wire services. The Morning Echo in 1915 defended its own stories when it wrote, "News dispatches from Kern county have been disseminated all over the coast showing up Bakersfield's best points and calling attention to Kern county's unlimited advantages for the home seeker."¹⁰ The Echo acknowledged its negative wire stories but justified them as appropriate news: the town marshal who refused to be fired,¹¹ the County rock quarry used for personal gain,¹² the \$200,000 jail known as "Jastro's Folly,"¹³ and the construction of the Kern River Bridge.¹⁴ Those pieces were newsworthy, but they added to the negative side of the Bakersfield ledger, which in May 1922 grew larger when the Bakersfield Californian, the Bakersfield Morning Echo, and the Taft

Midway Driller published the names of 350 local citizens associated with the Ku Klux Klan,

IMPERIAL PALACE
INVISIBLE EMPIRE
Knights of the Ku Klux Klan
(Incorporated)

ADLER OF THE
IMPERIAL WIZARD

Dear Sir:

We have been requested by one of your personal friends to get in touch with you, and inform you of this organization. And, in view of this request, we are sending you this form. When we receive this with all the questions below properly answered by you and if same is satisfactory we will impart to you the information your friend desires you to have. Without delay you will fill in, sign and return. You will find stamped envelope enclosed for this purpose.

Very truly yours,
KNIGHTS OF THE KU KLUX KLAN,

By _____

1. Is the motive prompting your inquiry serious?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your occupation?
4. Where were you born?
5. How long have you resided in your present locality?
6. Are you married, single or widower?
7. Were your parents born in the United States of America?
8. Are you a Gentile or Jew?
9. Are you of the white race or of a colored race?
10. What educational advantages have you?
11. Color of eyes? _____ Hair? _____ Weight? _____ Height? _____
12. Do you believe in the principles of a PURE Americanism?
13. Do you believe in White Supremacy?
14. What is your politics?
15. What is your religious faith?
16. Of what church are you a member (if any)?
17. Of what religious faith are your parents?
18. What secret, fraternal orders are you a member of (if any)?
19. Do you honestly believe in the practice of REAL fraternity?
20. Do you owe ANY KIND of allegiance to any foreign nation, government, institution, sect, people, ruler or person?

I most solemnly assert and affirm that each question above is truthfully answered by me and in my own handwriting and that below is my real signature.

Signed _____ Inquirer.

Business Address _____ Residence Address _____

Telephone No. _____ Telephone No. _____

Date _____, 192____

X. B.—If space above is not sufficient to answer question, then make your answer on the other side of this sheet. Number the answer to correspond with the question.

[http://www2.bakersfieldcollege.edu/stratton/ Outside%20documents/
1920s%20KKK%20application.htm](http://www2.bakersfieldcollege.edu/stratton/Outside%20documents/1920s%20KKK%20application.htm)

including Bakersfield Police Chief Stone and Kern County Supervisor Stanley Able.¹⁵

Critical comments about Bakersfield go back almost to its founding. A visitor in 1873 wrote, "Arriving at Bakersfield, the stage stopped in front of Chester's store on Chester street, near Chester's post office. Then we went to De Boy's Hotel, which if we ever go to again, we shall expect to make a short trip to the graveyard. It is a cozy little hotel where the hungry can sleep if they have any blankets, and the tired and weary traveler can recuperate his exhausted energies by an invigorating walk around the block. Fifty cents for an epizoid chunk of meat¹⁶ and a warm cup of slough water is reasonable enough if that is nothing more in the country; but I know there is abundance in the country to furnish a good square meal."¹⁷

Another newsman, visiting here in December 1874, agreed that the drainage of the swamps had "lessened the ague which once in awhile drives all Bakersfield to quinine and profanity,"¹⁸ but the rest of his story had a less ambiguous tone: "The thin tongue of the telegraph had ordered breakfast for us at French Hotel. Very welcome are the great wood fire and the rude plenty of this country tavern's rickety table, though those who taste its 'liquors' affirm it distilled from the snakes' fangs and rattles hung so plentifully around the bar."¹⁹

Also in the tavern were two heavily-clothed drivers preparing to board their stage. One rubbed an oiled rag against his revolver, and the other loaded his double-barreled shotgun. "The charge going into the gun," wrote the newsman, "is something to astonish an artilleryman; powder enough for a blunderbuss, and handfuls of BB shot and pistol-balls a quarter-inch in diameter. To an irrepressible inquiry as to what kind of game he was going to

destroy, the fur cap replied suspiciously and premonitorily, as if addressing a probably Vasquez or Dick Turpin, 'Two-legged game, Mister, as can't mind their own business.'"²⁰

The dread of armed men, malaria, poor food and drink, and penetrating cold were eclipsed on January 1, 1882 with the massive dust storm that grimed dinnerware, deposited sand in sugar, butter and coffee, and permeated furniture and floors. The storm's fury made it impossible to see a house across the street, made the insides of homes so dark that one could not read ordinary print,²¹ and infused the tightest rooms and closets with dust as fine as flour. Until the end of that storm on January 2, breathing was difficult and painful.²²

The calamity might have subtracted further from Bakersfield's image, but two months later the state press seems to have forgotten the storm. In February a visiting reporter wrote glowingly, "This place nestled among and half hidden by its numerous cottonwood trees does not present that dull and exceedingly quiet appearance that Tulare does. On the contrary business seems to be good, and while there is not a boom in any particular branch of trade, yet all seem to be steadily jogging long the road to prosperity. This is one of the loveliest days that can well be imagined, one of those warm, sunny, sleepy days of which this Central California climate is so prolific. And even man is indifferent to bodily exercise and cares only to sit and lazily dream or wander listlessly along and enjoy the calm, blissful content engendered by this wonderful, glorious, indescribable climate."²³

The Bakersfield Daily Evening Gazette must have shown a thin smile when reading that story because it knew Bakersfield was trying to live down a reputation for illnesses. In 1884 the Gazette explained, "It is true that this section was sickly ..., but it was nothing to compare to what people believed. We were afflicted the same as every valley in the state that was unimproved and had sloughs of stagnant water and thousands of acres of decaying vegetation. The dreaded Bakersfield fever, with all its horrors, dealing death on every side, existed only in the minds of nervous persons, and in reality it was merely a light malarial fever. That the climate and health of the valley has improved and continues to improve yearly, as the swamps are been reclaimed and the sloughs have been drained of the stagnant waters, no one can doubt."²⁴

Things were improving, but some of the bad press had come from the shenanigans of our own locals. The Gazette continued, "It is a satisfaction to the older residents of this valley to see some of the old foggy ideas regarding this section exploded, and happy is the man who came here last, for he was never threatened with the dire calamities which greeted those who came here in early days. Ten years ago the stranger was informed that he could not eat cucumbers, for each one of them contained a dozen or more of the Bakersfield shakes. He could not eat fruit, for that was almost certain death; the watermelon that cost a quarter would insure a physician a fee of \$50. Green corn, and most all vegetables, were equally dangerous."²⁵

"Our introduction to Kern County was not such as was calculated to inspire a feeling of admiration for the place. We were in Los Angeles, and one gentleman who learned that we were coming to Bakersfield, said that we could not stand the climate, that 'not even a fly can live there.' However we started. It was in the days of stage coaches across the Mojave desert, and the driver informed us that everybody that tried to live here died, and that his brother had stopped over here a day or two, and poor fellow, he died too. We concluded that we would try and stand the climate until we made sufficient money to get away on, and though we have been here for 10 years, we have not left yet – haven't made enough money to get away on."²⁶

"At that time a traveler would be afraid to camp for the night in the Kern valley, and only a few days after our arrival we were asked by two healthy-looking young men who had arrived here during the evening if we thought they could stay over the night without taking the fever. The residents of Bakersfield had a streak of humor about them, which was not very pleasant to strangers, though enjoyed by the residents, themselves."²⁷

"The stage would stop at what was then known as the Stage Hotel, and the passengers would get their supper. Three or four of the thinnest, sickliest looking individuals in the place would always be sitting on the porch of the hotel, and knowing the reputation that the valley had abroad, they would comment for the benefit of the strangers, who would be in misery during the entire time that they were forced to remain here."²⁸

"At one time a stranger stopped here and expressed his fear at remaining during the night. He was told that there was scarcely danger in his remaining, and the porter was instructed to conduct him to room No. 1.

'But,' said the porter, 'that dead man has not been taken from there yet.' 'Well, take him to No. 2. The man that died there has been taken out.' 'Yes, said the porter, but there is another sick man in there, and the doctor thinks he will die tonight.' The stranger paid his supper bill and concluded not to stay all night."²⁹

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On Jan. 22, 2013 the author read portions of this article before Kern Division, California Retired Teachers Association.

¹ See *Marshal Alex Mills and the 1876 Disincorporation of Bakersfield*, <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/crime1.html>

² Morning Echo, Sep 4, 1910

³ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 28, 1911

⁴ See *Tarring & Feathering of James Herrington, 1890*, <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/civRights1.html>

⁵ George W. Wear, *Pioneer Days and Kebo Club Nights*. Meador Pub. Co., Boston, 1932, pgs. 151-154, describe the lynching of five men on Dec 16, 1877. See also *Lynchings at the Kern County Jail, 1879*, <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/crime1.html>

⁶ Lawrence Weill, *Lawrence Weill's Bakersfield*. Kern County Historical Society, Pioneer Publishing, Fresno, 1984, p 84. Morning Echo, Dec 13, 1911, Editorial, p 10, col 1. For specific examples of the election frauds see Alfred Siemon, *California Here I Come. Inside Historic Kern. Selections from the Kern Co History Society's Quarterly, 1949-81*. pgs. 45-46. Pioneer Publishing, Fresno, Calif., 1982

⁷ Lynn Hay Rudy, *Granddad: Hugh A. Blodget in Early Bakersfield*. Jenner, California, 1990, p 89: "Ruling Democrats remained a powerful local political machine until 1915, in spite of national election results. This "Old Guard" led by H.A. Jastro, Col. Roberts, and A. Harrell's Bakersfield Californian finally became so corrupt it was overthrown by a reform faction of opposition Republicans and was one in by the new city charter of 1915."

⁸ Los Angeles Times, Feb 25, 1882

⁹ See *Mme. Brignaudy in the Bakersfield Tenderloin, 1905-33*, <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/crime1.html>

¹⁰ Morning Echo, May 16, 1915. Newspaper style of this period often omitted the second capital letter in Kern County.

¹¹ Bakersfield Californian, Feb 4, 1915

¹² Kern Co Superior Courts, Felony Division, Dec 16, 1914. Charges against KC Supervisor H.A. Jastro, and others, between Dec 16, 1914 and Dec 10, 1918 for jury stuffing, illegal

award of contracts, improper division of voter precincts, and improper payments for County Quarry work. See *Henry Jastro, Commodore of Kern County, 1848-1925*, <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/business1.html>

¹³ See *Lions at the Jail, 1915*, <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/community1.html>

¹⁴ Morning Echo, May 16, 1915. Although the Echo included in its list the concrete bridge at Chester Ave built in 1912, most saw the new bridge as a benefit paid for primarily from taxation of oil companies.

¹⁵ Bakersfield Californian, May 6, 1922. See also Kent Miller, *Ku Klux Klan in Kern County in 1922: Community Newspapers Respond to a Threat*, California State University, Northridge, 1992

¹⁶ The word *epizoic* implied the meat was diseased.

¹⁷ Visalia Delta, Mar 27, 1873

¹⁸ Ague is a fever, as malaria, marked by paroxysms of chills, fever and sweating that recur at regular intervals

¹⁹ Overland Monthly, Outwest Magazine, v14 #2, Feb 1875

²⁰ Ibid. Tiburcio Vasquez and Dick Turpin were outlaws.

²¹ Kern County Weekly Record, Jan 5, 1882

²² Kern County Californian, Jan 6, 1882

²³ Los Angeles Times, Feb 25, 1882

²⁴ Bakersfield Daily Evening Gazette, Jul 16, 1884

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.