



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

Bicycling California in 1896

By Gilbert Gia

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In 1896 the *Daily Californian* followed Bakersfield bicycle riders E. M. Beal and James E. Baker in their tour of Southern California. The idea was not a unique one. William Randolph Hearst at that time was sponsoring his "Yellow-Fellow Transcontinental Bicycle Race," a gimmick Hearst cooked up to boost circulation of the *New York Herald*.

Hearst named his race after the Yellow Kid, a popular cartoon character drawn by Richard F. Outcault. Outcault worked for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, but in September 1896 Hearst's headhunters hired Outcault away from the *World* to pen the Yellow Kid for the *New York Journal*. Building on a sure thing, Hearst outfitted a group of bicycle-relay riders with yellow jerseys and christened his cross-country event the Yellow Fellow Race.

Bakersfield's *Daily Californian* couldn't afford a transcontinental race, but it did two Bakersfield men in a race "ridden against time on a red tandem." ¹ In a story that would shift gears easily, the paper, a few days later, adjusted that description: The six-week trip would not be a race because "...riders will make no attempt to break a record as far as the time away on the trip is concerned... a careful register is to be kept of the actual riding time and distance covered, and the record made in that respect." ²

¹ *Daily Californian*, Aug 31, 1896. The expression "yellow journalism" first arose during this race. Hearst filled his newspapers with pseudo-news about the event. The public was not duped, and it dubbed Hearst's newspapers the nicknames "yellow-kid journals," "yellow journals," and finally, "yellow journalism."

² Beal and Baker would not be breaking new ground. In the previous decade, American bicyclists had completed several remarkable long-distance rides. In 1886, Thomas Stevens bicycled from San Francisco to

Just finding roads between California towns in 1896 was a challenge, which was the Californian's reason for following the Beale and Baker ride. "This trip is one which many wheelers are anxious to take, but about which the most conflicting reports are given out. Some are to the effect that the roads, grades and climate are fine; others say that the roads are bad, grades heavy, and climate miserable. Now, we want to know something about the lay of the land in that region, and the next party starting on that trip will, if they will call at this office before going, learn something to their advantage. Trips of this kind are becoming quite popular and the great drawback has been that writers have been compelled to start out without any knowledge whatever of the kind of roads they were to traverse."

Riders Beal and Baker knew little about the roads to San Francisco, but in general they knew they had to pass Visalia, Fresno, Pacheco Pass, San Jose and "Haywards." Once they reached San Francisco they planned to rest for a week and then board an ocean steamer to Santa Monica. They would then bicycle south to Los Angeles, on to San Diego, and then venture 200 miles into Mexico. The return trip would be also "awheel" through San Diego and Los Angeles before crossing the mountains to Bakersfield.

The Yellow-Fellow Transcontinental Bicycle Race left San Francisco for the East Coast on August 25, 1896, and ten days later the Bakersfield riders started on the first leg of their trip. Beal and Baker weren't completely alone because Alfred McCray would follow them on his own red bike as far as San Francisco. On Sat, Sept. 6, 1896, Beal, Baker, and McCray mailed their first letter home. "From Visalia. We left Bakersfield about six o'clock yesterday morning and struck a heavy headwind the first thing. We decided to take it easy." They reported that the road to Delano was "fine" and from there to Aliea was between "bad and good." At Aliea, they had hard going. Baker wrote, "From there we took to the railroad for about 5 miles, and then we took the hobo trail, which was very good riding as far as Tipton, with the

the East Coast of the United States, and he didn't finish up until several months later in India. In the early 1890s, two college graduates, Sachtleben and Allen, rode their bicycles in a 15,000-mile, three-year trip across Europe and into China. Notable among the long distance riders of those times was a rider with one-leg named Frank Beedleson, who in 1893 biked from San Francisco to New York in 66 days.

exception of about a dozen or wire fences that we had to climb over."³

"From Tipton we took the road to Tulare, where Beal was down with over-heat-- he'd fainted so we decided to stop for three hours. At Tulare we met Mr. Keller, who recently left Bakersfield and is now in the Andersen drugstore. He filled Beal up with all kinds of good things after he fainted, which is probably what brought him around so quickly."

"We left Tulare after dark in a thunderstorm and rode over a bad road, which was graded with straw halfway to Visalia, and when we left the straw road we struck a road that was full of chuckholes and sand, but Baker acted as pilot and brought us through all right, after an hour and a half of very hard riding."

"We had only two accidents -- McCray had a puncture 12 miles out of Bakersfield, and Beal was under the weather as mentioned above. We made 43 miles in the morning and 34.6 miles in the afternoon. All hands feel fine and are anxious for the start to Fresno. Yours very truly, Beal and Baker." The men averaged about 12 miles per hour on the first day's run.⁴

The next letter was dated September 7 from Los Banos. "We spent a very pleasant day in Visalia Sunday riding around on their paved streets in the morning and after lunch taking the plunge in the 'nat.'⁵ At 12:30 a.m. Monday we started for Mendota over a good level road and arrived there at 4:20 a.m. We had breakfast there and proceeded on toward Los Banos. The road from Mendota is fair, it being over the old, graded roadbed of the Santa Fe Railroad. From the Dos Palos Ranch to Los Banos we found the road rather heavy in some places, although fair when we left Mendota.⁶

"The wind was blowing very hard directly in our face. We asked the railroad agent if the wind blew all day. He said it blew until

³ They rode the rail bed. Letters were dated from Sept 6 to Sept 29, 1896

⁴ They rode seven to eight hours. Pneumatic tires were first patented in 1889. At the time of this ride, thirty different tire styles were available. In 1896 leading tire manufacturer Morgan and Wright of Chicago offered a soft-riding, double-tubed tire "quick and easy to repair." The *Californian* didn't mention the kind of tandem Beal and Baker rode, but it certainly was a "safety" bicycle, that is a bicycle that had two equally-sized wheels and a diamond frame. The safety bicycle first appeared on the market in 1887 in the Victor bicycle line and was the standard frame for the industry for the next 100 years.

⁵ natatorium or swimming pool

about nine o'clock. He probably meant that it blew until about nine o'clock sometime next week, because it has not ceased blowing for a minute all day, and it is still blowing a gale at 9:30 tonight. We only averaged 8 miles an hour to-day on account of the wind. We had no accidents. We probably will make San Jose tomorrow. PS: Don't open your eyes too wide at the time we made from Visalia to Mendota as we almost forgot to mention that the trip was made over the Southern Pacific Company's lines. We had to pay an excess baggage rate of forty cents on each bicycle."⁷

Letter number three was dated September 8 from Gilroy. "We left Los Banos this morning at seven o'clock with the intention of making San Jose tonight, but we had a streak of hard luck and were sidetracked for repairs at a ranch 10 miles east of the Pacheco Pass (San Louis Ranch). We were running along at a 12 mile clip and in making a sharp turn to cross the road, which had been graded with gravel, to take the bicycle trail on the left side, we ripped out four spokes on the rear wheel, all on the left side in a row, and that meant a walk to the next ranch a mile and half."⁸

⁶ "Heavy" meaning steep.

⁷ The team did not mind riding the train on this part of the trip. At the time of this letter, Hearst's Yellow Fellow Transcontinental Bicycle Relay had gone from San Francisco to New York and covered 3,400 miles in 13 days, 29 minutes.

⁸ In 1896 a rider stopped the machine by dragging a shoe against the front tire. Beal and Baker's tandem might have had a braking system, but two more years would pass before a reliable coaster brake system was patented. Bicycle repair was then big business. By 1896, American riders had spent \$200 million on bicycle parts and repairs but only \$300 million on new bicycles. The statistic prompted a popular ditty: "Hey, diddle-diddle/ The bicycle riddle/ The strange-est part of the deal/Just check your accounts/ And add the amounts/ And the sundries cost more than the wheel."



RALEIGH Nos. 9 and 10 TANDEMS.

(NOTTINGHAM MAKE.)

The fact that one of these machines was ridden by Messrs. Mills and Edge from Land's End to John o' Groat's, 876 miles, in 3 days, 4 hours, 46 minutes, breaking the record for all types of machines, and being the first tandem to go over the trying course without a breakdown, is a proof of the excellence of this design.

No. 9 PATH RACER. Equal 28" wheels; double tangent spokes; Westwood hollow rims; 1½" Dunlop tandem path racing tyres; 25" back and 26" front frame; 6¼" cranks; 90" gear (interchangeable); Perry's best chains; 5½" rear tread; 3½" rat-trap pedals; Brooks' best saddles. Weight as illustrated, 40-lbs.

No. 10 ROAD RACER. Equal 28" wheels; double tangent spokes; Westwood hollow rims; 1½" Dunlop tandem road racing tyres; 25" back and 26" front frame; 6¼" cranks; 80" gear (interchangeable); Perry's best chains; 5¾" rear tread (with clearance for gear case); 3½" rat-trap pedals; Brooks' best saddles; detachable lamp bracket and step. Weight, 43-lbs.

PRICE (OF EITHER MACHINE) £39.

Extras to No. 10: Detachable spoon brake with renewable rubber shoe 30/-; detachable steel mud guards, 10/-; Raleigh detachable gear case covering both chains, £5.

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The men were stranded ten miles east of Pacheco Pass, and they had to improvise. "When we arrived at the ranch we found nothing but an old anvil and a four-pound hammer to work with, but we took charge of them and went to work to replace the spokes, but as we had no spokes with us and nothing to put in except bailing wire, we were in a bad fix until Baker set his brain to work, and then things began to come our way. He took out the broken spokes and made a hook at the end next to the hub (all the spokes broke next to the hub). Then by pounding away at them for a while he drew each one of them out half an inch, making them long enough to catch the thread on the thimble of the rim. He had to take off the tire in the operation, and after we got the spokes repaired and were ready to put the tire on, we found our cement missing, and Mr. Baker again got in his good work by putting gasoline on the rim, which softened the old cement and we had no more trouble. We were delayed about three hours, so we decided to lay over here to-night and make the run to San Jose in the morning and spend the day there, taking in the races in the afternoon and visiting friends."

The third letter was written the following morning, "We made the trip over the Pass in great shape, for the roads are fine with the

exception of the heavy headwind they have up in this country. From the summit of Pacheco Pass to Gilroy the roads are fine and all downgrade. We met a large band of Gypsies as we came down and they all wanted to tell our fortune, but we thought ignorance was bliss and refused to hear them. We will send in a report of the races at San Jose tomorrow, as it will probably interest Wheelmen."

The fourth letter was dated September 10 from San Francisco. "We left Gilroy with another tandem team headed for San Jose at nine o'clock yesterday morning and made the run (32 miles) in two hours and a half, including a stop for repairs which took about 10 or 15 minutes. We took in the races at San Jose, which were very fine. The fastest time for one-mile was made by the Rambler triplet⁹ in a time of 2 min, 8-2/5 sec [average speed 28 mi/hr] by H. Downing of San Jose. Decker was on the track and did some very fine riding and won everything except the one-mile handicap. Several had falls, but nothing very serious."

"In the evening the Garden City Wheel Men (San Jose wheel men) gave a roof garden party to the visitors, which was very nice with the exception of a few hoodlums that are generally to be found at such parties. The GCW have a very fine club, and their rooms are fitted out in good shape. The wheel men of San Jose say they could not get along without their club for they always know where to go to pass away a few hours in the evening when there is nothing else to do."

The nationwide economic depression that began in the early 1890s lasted almost until the end of the decade. But it didn't effect bicycle sales. In 1893 bicycle makers offered more than a thousand models, and they urged readers to buy a new bicycle every spring. In March 1895 in Bakersfield, a new Waverly sold for \$85, which is about \$1,800 in 2007 dollars. Used machines were also available. In 1896, Dave Barnard's bicycle shop opposite the fire engine house sold used Ideals for \$70 and used Ramblers for \$60.

What kind of person could afford a bicycle that cost more than a year's wages for the working man? In September 1896 the *Daily Californian* wrote, "This club is composed of the best of our young men, men who are healthy in body and mind, [and] full of enthusiasm..." Club members like attorney Ben Brundage who later became Judge Benjamin Brundage were indeed full of enthusiasm. They were well-to-do, but were

they "the best of our young men"?

They were civic-minded. That month the Wheelmen club interviewed candidates for the Kern County Board of Supervisors in order to find out where they stood on road improvement. After the meeting, members agreed to remove rubbish and loose rocks from Chester Avenue. With respect to the upcoming town election the club announced, "We can certainly secure enough taxpayers in the club to serve in each precinct as election officers without charge, which would be of great assistance to the [incorporation of Bakersfield]."

Beal and Baker's letters continued. "We arrived in San Francisco this morning and will probably be there for several days, as we want to make several runs to places around the city and return at night. I think that it will be interesting to the wheel men of Bakersfield to know how the roads are that we came over and to know something about the course to take coming to San Francisco from Bakersfield, so I will mark the course the best I can. From Bakersfield to Tulare, good roads and generally a headwind. From Tulare to Fresno, very bad roads. From Fresno to Mendota, very bad roads. From Mendota to Los Banos, level but dusty and headwinds. From Los Banos to San Louis Ranch, good roads and wind in the afternoon. San Louis Ranch to summit of Pacheco Pass, 97 miles, good roads but an uphill pull and would advise traveling wheel men to walk from the foot of the grade to the summit, three miles. From summit to Gilroy, good roads. From Gilroy to San Francisco, good roads."

"We will not write while in the city unless something unusual turns up, for we will probably be on the jump all the time we are in San Francisco and will try to have a good time. Forward our papers here until we let you know when we start south."¹⁰ Their next letter, dated September 20 from San Francisco, mentioned they enjoyed riding in the park and listening to the wheelmen there complain about how bumpy Market street was.

Beal and Baker's next letter was dated September 27 from Oceanside. Their original plan was to take a steamer from San Francisco to Santa Monica, but on October 1 an article in the *Californian* from the *Los Angeles Record* showed that the Bakersfield riders had bypassed Santa Monica and continued on to San Diego. The following letter is a

⁹ A three-man bicycle

¹⁰ The men were reading the Bakersfield newspaper.

reverse itinerary because after they arrived in San Diego they did venture into Mexico. Baker seems to mix up some of the geography.

"Dear *Californian*, we arrived in Oceanside at 3:30 this afternoon and we expect to have fair roads from here to Los Angeles. Intended to come here yesterday, but unfortunately lost our road in the mountains and only got as far as Escondido.¹¹ We did not write you in Escondido, as we were in a hurry to leave the place and were very tired after our ride and did not try to make much of a run today."

"We left that place this morning about 9:30 and struck fair roads as far as here, a little hilly, but hard and not much sand. The road from Escondido to San Diego is about 36-1/2 miles and the last 5 miles is the only place that we were out of the mountains, and that was very sandy and full of chuckholes that are impossible to see, for they're covered up with very fine sand or dust. It is a case of walk about half the way to Escondido-- and bad walking, too."

"We rode the railroad for 5 miles, Oceanside is 62 1/2 miles from San Diego by way of Escondido and about 40 by the coast road. We will start in the morning for Santa Anna and will probably be there in a couple of days. Our only mishap between here and San Diego was a broken chain, but we repaired it on the road. We are both feeling good and not riding hard, as we have our worst roads between Los Angeles and Bakersfield."

They explained why their trip into Mexico didn't go far: "I suppose you will be surprised when you find that we only crossed the Mexican line then came right back into United States, but the roads were full of mountains and sand and we decided that this country was good enough for us and we saw all we wanted of Mexico. --Yours very truly, Beal and Baker."

The next letter was dated September 29 from Santa Ana. In it they described the prior night in San Juan Capistrano where a hotelkeeper named Mendelson took them on a wagon tour of the area. The next morning they left about eleven, made the 25-mile ride to Santa Anna in about 2-1/2 hours, and Baker's uncle put them up that night. Beal wrote that the roads there were good "due to their water wagons generally going over them."

By October 5 Beal and Baker were at home in Bakersfield and telling the *Californian* that Bakersfield roads were the best of any

they'd seen. But it was a brief interview, perhaps because the paper said that their story appeared "elsewhere." Very likely the Bakersfield *Morning Echo* scooped the Californian. If that were the case, then Beal and Baker's final account of the trip will never be known because back issues of the *Echo* prior to 1900 have been lost. Did Beal and Baker ride over the mountains from Los Angeles? Throughout the trip Beal and Baker freely changed their itinerary. Perhaps by the time they reached Los Angeles they had reservations about attempting the high mountains in the Fall. Perhaps they paid the forty cents baggage fee and took the train home to Bakersfield.

¹¹ on the 25th