



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California
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Vincent Clerou's Building

By Gilbert Gia
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Vincent's bicycle and sporting goods at 1723-18th across the street from the Post Office was there for longer than most of us can remember, and today the 81-year-old landmark is up for sale. Its story starts two years before it was built. In 1927 Bakersfield businessmen James L. and James I. McMahan bought a nearby vacant lot for a luxury hotel, and when the Padre opened on April 12, 1928 at the northwest corner of 18th and H it was an immediate success.¹



Looking west, Padre is at arrow. Building just visible at extreme left is Hotel El Tejon

Guests parked their cars one block east at 18th and Eye at Richfield Oil's *Padre Super Service*, where vehicles were gassed, oiled, washed and waxed and returned to the

¹ Mary Brundage owned the property, and the old Brundage home was on that block. The Padre was built to compete with Hotel El Tejon, which was at Chester and Truxtun.

hotel 24-hours a day.² In 1928 the McMahan family started construction on a new parking garage nearby.³ The two-story, reinforced-concrete monolith would have parking both in the basement and on the second floor, and its street level would be a men's clothing store managed by Dean McMahan, a nephew.⁴ About 1930 the new building opened as McMahan Parking Garage.⁵ A metal-framed gas station went up next to it on the corner.⁶



US Post Office and Padre across the street from Vincent's Building

Vincent Henry Clerou, the third of eight children, was selling newspapers when he was seven.⁷ In his later years, one of his often-told stories was about when he graduated from 8th grade at Washington School in 1925. It always ended with the words “... *and that was the only diploma I ever got.*” Vince did drop out of school in his early teens, but

² In 1931 the 18th and Eye Street gas station was called Gerald Harris's.

³ East and adjacent to the garage is the Porterfield Hotel (Smartt Apartments) built in 1911. Author's interview with Vincent's daughter Romaine C. Clerou: "My dad told me that in the summers in the 1920s the big vacant lot where the garage now is was used for Chautauqua shows." Chautauquas were educational lectures, concerts, and dramatic events, often performed in outdoor settings.

⁴ Dean McMahan, 24, and his 8 year-old nephew Donald Zimmer were lost at sea at Oceano, CA, on Jul 26, 1931. (*Los Angeles Times*, Jul 29, 1931)

⁵ Some say McMahan Development Co originally designed the garage for six-stories. (http://www.bakersfieldcity.us/edcd/Pdfs/stepping%20into%20the%20past_walking_tour.pdf). At the time McMahan also owned a furniture store at 18th and H St.

⁶ The gas pumps are gone today, but the metal awing remains as a clue to its original use.

⁷ Vincent Clerou, b. 1910 – d. Sep 15, 1996

his learning never stopped. His brother Joe remarked, "In all ways, my brother was a self-made man."⁸

Vince Clerou's introduction to the bike business started when the 10-year-old hung around Jack Nelson's bicycle shop on Baker Street, just around the corner from the Clerous.⁹ Before long, Vince was collecting bicycle parts and fixing and selling them from his family's back yard.

Vince also liked to tell the story about when his father complained that none of his sons followed him into the sheep business.¹⁰ Vince told his dad, "What do you expect with a name like Clerou? *Cle-ROU*." *Cle* means *key* in French, and *rou* means wheel. Locks and wheels had become Vince's life work.¹¹

As a young fellow he held several jobs, many at the same time. In 1925 Louis Roux and C.E. Kuentzel hired the 15-year-old as a bicycle mechanic for their Eye Street bike, gun, and lock shop. About then Vince was also a driver for Doughty, Calhoun, O'Meara funeral home. He later told his daughter he knew he didn't want to go into that line of business.

In 1934 Vince had a falling-out with Roux and Kuentzel, and he quit.¹² During the Depression the McMahans had divided the garage's street-level into smaller spaces, and Vince put together \$63 and a loan and rented one of them, a narrow, 12x40-foot sidewalk frontage. His sign said, "Clerou's Bicycles." In the alley behind was Jimmy Riggins' Flowers, and next door on the sidewalk were Davenport's Typewriters and Betty Thompson's Beauty Shop.¹³ After a couple of months he couldn't make the rent, but his

⁸ Author's telephone conversation with Romaine C. Clerou, Sep 2003.

⁹ The Clerous lived at 924 Kentucky then at 823 Niles St in East Bakersfield.

¹⁰ Vincent Clerou's parents were Luis and Lucy (Farran) Clerou.

¹¹ Vincent Clerou and George Spears set a world land-speed record on a bicycle, 108.92 MPH. [Author's interview with Sam and Irene Restituto, 2003]. See also <http://www.bicyclemuseum.com/assets/Letourner.pdf>

¹² Vincent Clerou married Ann J. McDonald.

¹³ Before 1947, Bakersfield city directories show so many changing addresses at the building that it is not possible to know where those stores were along the sidewalk.

shop had attracted so much foot-traffic for other businesses that the McMahans couldn't let him go.¹⁴

The metal-framed gas station never had one owner for very long: D.A. Cusham Gas (1930); Easton & Sybrandt's Tires (1932); Holland Real Estate (1940); and F.M. Hamilton Restaurant (1946). After Hamilton left, other gas stations followed: Power's; Pritchard's; Benzino's; and finally McNamara's.



Vincent's Building on 18th. Porterfield Hotel, l.; gas station, r.
Ramp to 2nd Floor parking is just at left of station

In 1946 McMahan sold the Padre to six Chicago investors, including attorney Milton Miller,¹⁵ But Vincent Clerou bought the garage and station and restored its original name, Padre Super Service. On opening day his daughter Romaine C. Clerou handed out cigars to the men and gardenias to the women. In 1974 the station became Vincent's Safe Shop, and after that the entire corner was known as Vincent's.

¹⁴ Author's interview with Romaine C. Clerou.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Romaine C. Clerou. By Sep 10, 1964 an Illinois trust owned the Padre, and 56% of the trust was owned by Milton Miller. The hotel was operated on lease by Bakersfield Hotel Co., Inc., President George Evans. (*Los Angeles Times*)



“Uncle Scrooge's door”

Inside the old station is restaurant table mounted on an automobile hydraulic lift and behind that on the east wall is a massive, bank-vault door. Its combination lock is marked “York Safe & Lock Company, York, PA.”¹⁶ Mornings, Vince entered the main store via the vault door, and at night he locked it behind him. It was the only door without a burglar alarm.¹⁷

Access to the commodious, second-floor parking is via a ramp off 18th and the basement's 16 parking spaces are reached from an alley ramp. Vince stored his antique bicycle collection down there, and in a little room under the auto ramp he tested firearms. Did the noise bother anyone? Romaine said the customers upstairs didn't hear a thing.

¹⁶ In the 1920s York built mammoth safe doors for the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. During WWII, York manufactured 40-mm naval cannons and armored vehicles. Romaine noted, "Dad installed it in the 1970s. He knew where to buy good things." The door, now a little rusty, is no longer used. Romaine recalled children who asked if Uncle Scrooge lived behind the door. (Scrooge McDuck was a comic-book character that first appeared in *Four Color Comics #178* published by Dell Comics in Dec 1947.)

¹⁷ Security was needed because Clerou also sold firearms. An impressive, although disabled, 50-caliber machine gun was on display behind his gun counter.

Romaine remembered her father contentedly adjusting and truing bicycle wheels into his final years. One Monday she noticed something wrong. "He seemed to be finishing up details. On Saturday he made sure I could open the safe and things like that. Then he told me he was dying. I said, "No, you just need to rest." My father died the next day. I knew he loved his work, and I always thought that that was the way he wanted it because our store was always closed on Sundays."

Outside, high on the west wall are two, modest words. Many businesses have come and gone from this concrete structure, but Vincent Clerou was there for more than 60 years. The words "Vincent's Building" are most appropriate.

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