



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

www.gilbertgia.com

Kern Teachers in Cameos, 1875-1961

By Gilbert P. Gia

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The Pleasure of Visiting the Public School, 1875¹

“We had the pleasure of visiting the public school on Friday last on the occasion of the monthly exhibition and examination. The exercises were of special interest to parents, and there were a goodly number present. The exercises consisted in declamation, singing, and reading of the compositions. The larger scholars added dialogue, and the younger children were confined to single pieces.”

“Among so many interesting we recall the following: "The Old Armchair," by Mattie Tungate, "A Temperance Song," by Eddie Willow, "Waiting for Luck," by Martha Baker, "The Dying Soldier," by William Tibbett. The comical dialogs of both boys and girls added to the entertainment.”

“The girls’ and boys’ compositions were respectively embodied in a paper, with the first read by Misses Grace Ranney and Ella Roper, the second by Thomas A. Baker and Eddie Jamison. The reading was credibly performed, and elicited marked attention. The school is admirably conducted by Mr. L. A. Beardsley, County Superintendent of schools, assisted by Miss Ella Said, as the general character of the school affirmed.”

“There is a growing interest manifested in education throughout the county, which would increase if the efforts of the present teachers to obtain the attendance of parents and citizens as frequent visitors could be carried out. In the hurry of business too little regard is paid to the necessities of the children, and their comfort is largely given any thought. The present school house was built in 1859, when the

¹ Kern County Weekly Courier, Mar 4, 1875. Transcribed by Gilbert Gia for the May 2012 CalRTA Pulse.

population of Bakersfield was scarcely 50 persons, and the little school had but nine scholars. The space occupied by the scholars is about 20 x 30 feet, with a peak of platform at the back. The scholars now on the list number 65, with an average attendance of 50. The population of the town has increased to nearly 1,000. The necessity for more room applies not only to the crowded state of the house, but to the fact that new applicants are excluded for want of space, and if a scholar is absent for a few days, when he or she returns, the space is taken by a new one. Such a state of things appeal to every member of the community for reform, and we hope to be able to impress the great requisite upon all, and aid in effecting a deliverance of both teachers and children from the serious and needless obstacles to improvement."

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Havilah Gets a New Teacher, 1873²

For several days the 18 year-old teacher's traveling trunk had been packed and ready for her new job at Havilah in the mountains of Kern County. In early September she said a tearful goodbye to her parents at San Francisco, boarded the stage for Sacramento, and from there made the 240-mile train ride to Tipton, which then was the end of the line.

She was the sole woman at the stagecoach station. She approached the ticket agent, and after he collected \$14 for her ticket he rolled out the Fairbanks scale to weigh passenger luggage. Most of those present that morning had crossed the country several times, and they expected to pay a dollar a pound for each pound over 40.

The teacher's little trunk weighed in at 90 pounds. Her surcharge was less than dollar a pound, but she owed the company an extra \$2.50, which was equal to about as much as \$45 is today. But she didn't have the money.

Chivalrous males who stepped forward wondered aloud at how such a small truck could weigh 90 pounds. Each cavalier in turn then stepped up to the scale and weighed himself, and all were surprised to see that overnight each one of them had gained 25 pounds. The express agent wailed that the scales were correct, and the men held in defense of the fair young damsel.

The trip to Havilah crossed over the hardest, dustiest roads imaginable. The light-duty stage was old and shaky, its horses broken down, and the miles exceedingly slow. The drivers were altogether

² *Sacramento Daily Union*, Oct 4, 1873. Adapted by Gilbert Gia and printed in the April 2012 *CalRTA Pulse*.

profane, insulting, unaccommodating and holding themselves miles above the human species they called their passengers.

That trip must have been hard for the young woman, but thanks to those gallants who chipped in for her “extra baggage,” Havilah got its new teacher. If her later story were typical of most schoolmarms on the California frontier, within two years she would have been married, out of the classroom, and starting a family.

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The Schoolmarm and the Cowboy, 1885

By Frank C. Tibbetts³

"Once upon a time and long before there was an auto even dreamed of, there came to our mountain cow town a highly educated and beautiful schoolmarm. All the young cowboys went wild over her, and there was great competition as to who should receive the most favors. One handsome boy finally received her permission to take a buggy ride with him. After greasing his boots with bear oil and plastering his hair in place, he donned his 10-gallon hat and silk bandanna and hazed the team of fiery steeds up to her place of abode.

"They, the schoolmarm and the cowboy, tore down the lane, leaving a cloud of dust behind and were well out on the plains when they passed by a dead animal. The teacher grabbed her nose and uttered the following, "Whew! How obnoxious the effluvious is which arises from a defunct quadruped." After the cowboy also got a nose-full of smell and seeing the actions of his partner, he answered thusby: "Yes, Miss, a dead jackass does stink like hell."

"They both seemed to fully understand each other by the two extreme methods of using the English language. Now that the ice was broken, their talk drifted from one subject to another, and finally the suggestion of a dance was decided upon. There happened to be a country dance taking place that very evening at a place called 'Bull Center,' having derived its name from the fact that most every night at this particular location the cattle would drift in from the surrounding

³ Frank Tibbetts (1869-1936) of Kernville was not only a talented writer but had other creative flares; in 1897 he was in the Kernville Dramatic Club presentation *Ruined by Drink*. Gilbert Gia read Tibbetts's story before the Kern Division, CalRTA general meeting of June 2010, and it was published in the CalRTA *Pulse*.

range for water and bed down for the night. So our young friends decided to take it in. As the shades of evening were falling fast, by the time they arrived, the orchestra, which consisted of a fiddle and a guitar, was turning out a pathetic ballad entitled "Turkey in the Straw" and later rendering various and numerous other numbers such as "Peeking through a Knothole in Father's Wooden Leg" and "Ma's False Teeth Will Soon Fit Sister."

"Our teacher fell right into the spirit of things and soon was having a rip-roaring time, while the young cowboys were falling over each other to see who would be her next partner. At midnight, coffee was served from 5-gallon coal oil cans concocted by one Beve Robinson, owner of the layout. There were various kinds of food also, and I recall one item was jerky venison. About daybreak the dance broke up, fortunately without any gunfights, and our teacher expressed it thusly: "I have had the time of my young life."

"The final result of this story was that the cowboy and teacher were married and have raised a big family of native sons and daughters who often listen to their mother's early experience of the West and the dead mule episode, from which they derive great amusement."

Note: This story was one of three by Tibbitts in the Kern County Library, McGuire Local History Room vertical file *Stoney Brook*. Attached to Tibbitts's story was a typed letter on a County of Kern letterhead dated February 7, 1932. In it Superintendent E. A. Schaper, M.D. of Stony Brook tuberculosis sanitarium at Keene wrote to Kern County High School Principal Herman A. Spindt, "As you requested, we are enclosing copies of some of the Kern County reminiscences written by Frank C. Tibbetts, one of our patients." Why did Principal Spindt want Tibbitts's recollections? Spindt was a local historian. In 1934-35 he was president of the Kern County Historical Society.

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Beautiful Blond Ali, 1890⁴

My grandfather Tom Williams was reared in England and mined right up until the time he homesteaded in Walker's Basin. He knew only little about ranching, and that necessitated his only child, Nickolas (my father) to learn how to be a cowboy at a very young age. Nick went to school at the old schoolhouse in Walker's Basin where Mrs. H.P. Bender, then Cora McGrann, was the first teacher.⁵ Nick remembers a sound thrashing she gave him, and there's no doubt he needed it, as some of the stories he told us prove.

In the early 1880s my father rode his little mare to school. She was fast and willing, and on the way home my father prayed for jack rabbits. A fleet horse and an agile, fast rabbit made for great sport, but when Nick got home the mare sometimes lay down instead of eating her feed. My grandmother said, "Nicky, you've been chasing rabbits again. You shall walk to school tomorrow!" That was severe punishment because my father was fast becoming the proverbial cowboy who would walk a mile to catch a horse so he could ride it a quarter-of-a-mile.

When he grew to young manhood he often rode across the mountains to Hot Springs Valley⁶ to associate with the young people there. One day the Carden brothers had a doings on their ranch, and that was where Nick met the beautiful, blond Alice Yates, who they called Ali. She was about 19 and the finest woman rider in the whole country. She broke her own colts and took care of her mother's cattle on Greenhorn Mountain, and she rode a western saddle while working,

⁴ Gilbert Gia organized and modified this California Odyssey Project interview of Mary Alice Williams Rankin (1891-1973), and Kern Division CalRTA published it the June 2010 *Pulse*.

⁵ Cora McGrann Bender retired as a Bakersfield school principal. She was a past-president of Kern County Retired Teachers Association.

⁶ Lake Isabella

which shocked many women, especially my grandmother, who called it riding clothes-pin fashion.

The day at Carden's, Ali was riding sidesaddle on her favorite colt, Dexter, and she dared Nick to jump on behind. It was in Nick's nature to take a dare, especially from a pretty girl. Dexter broke into a gallop, and Nick and Ali held on, until the saddle began to come apart. Nick saw a golden opportunity to play the hero, so when he jumped, he pulled Ali off with him. Nick was highly entertained all the next day helping her fix her saddle.

My father didn't leave the Carden's until he persuaded my mother to break her engagement with another fellow and brave the frontier with him as his wife. Nick was an ardent suitor, so their courtship of 1890 lasted only about three weeks. They had \$17 between the two of them, but they were undaunted; both were eager to face life together. They rode their horses down the toll road built by Col. Baker, were married that afternoon in Bakersfield, and put up their horses in a livery stable on Nineteenth Street. The next morning when they saddled up, Ali's horse didn't like the sound his hooves made on the stable boards, and he reared out of that livery bucking and scattering people walking in the street.

My father built a very nice home for his bride on a beautiful, peaceful spot among tall pine trees and provided for his growing family by raising cattle and hauling freight for miners on Piute Mountain. But the happy home was broken up by my mother's sudden passing in 1899. It left my father with four little children, all under eight years. His mother and father were 69 years of age by then, but they opened their home to their son and his brood of helpless little ones. They gave them loving care, and taught them to be kind, honest and thrifty, and to love the Bible and trust in God.

My father was sorely in need of a helpmate, so in 1900 he married May McClure in Havilah. Surely love is blind, either that or May McClure had a lot of courage to undertake such a big responsibility. Eight girls were born to their union. The three girls of my father's first family educated ourselves after finishing the grammar grades. My sister Beatrix and I became school teachers, Virginia a registered nurse, and the girls from his second family became competent office workers and have always held responsible positions. And Boy, who was my father's only son? He went to war and later ran a business out in San Bernardino County with his uncle.

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Teacherages and Homes for Retired Teachers, 1900⁷

By Gilbert Gia, 2015

In 1900 county schools suffered from "suitcase-teacher syndrome," which meant that rural school districts could not retain their teachers, and as bad as that, two-thirds of teachers had no classroom experience at all.⁸ Low salaries and remote locations contributed to the turn-over, but so did the lack of decent housing.⁹ One remedy was teacherages, or district-sponsored teacher residences. Communities that offered them did not lack applicants, and they could choose among the best. They also could pay lower salaries.¹⁰ Between 1915 and 1921, the legislatures of 15 states granted school districts permission to build teacherages,¹¹ and although California did not, Kern County was so vast and rural it was an allowed exception.

In 1916 Kern County Superintendent of Schools Lawrence Chenoweth spoke about school districts that provided teacher housing in remote areas of the county, in those places where a teacher would have difficulty securing "*a good boarding place.*" By then Kern County teacherages were in place at the districts of McKittrick, Olig, Tejon, Castle Rock, Petroleum, Panama, Barnes, and Rockpile.¹² In 1919 Chenoweth said that the 15 Kern County teacherage then on the Westside had "*solved many vexing problems of securing teachers in*

⁷ Some of this piece was printed in the CalRTA *Pulse*, Apr 2009

⁸ Philander Priestly Claxton, *Cottages for County School Teachers*, 1916, p 293 [Claxton was U.S. Commissioner of Education from 1911 to 1921]. Referenced by Patricia A. Carter in *Everybody's Paid But The Teacher. The Teaching Profession, And the Women's Movement*. Teachers College Press, 2002, ISBN: 0807742066.

⁹ Carter, p 73

¹⁰ C.W. Thomason, *Sunset Magazine*, Mar 1915. v. 34, pp 554 - 555. [Referenced by Carter]

¹¹ Carter, p 74

¹² Thanks to retired school superintendent and school historian Jerry Kirkland for this paragraph.

the oil fields." ¹³

Housing in Taft was in short supply by 1920. Taft Mayor Harry Morgan remarked, *"The recent arrival of the school teachers brings out forcibly the deplorable fact that the city is not in a position to even provide decently for teachers who are to be entrusted with the instruction of our youth. To offer teachers a salary slightly in advance of many places, and then bring them to a place where more than half of that pay must go to room and board is a disgrace to the community and then an insult to sound judgment. Many teachers have not even been able to find sleeping room other than in the hotels. The only possible solution is to immediately provide room for teachers, and such accommodations could be and should be provided for by the school boards. An apartment for light housekeeping could be reasonably built at each school or adjacent to it. In the matter of cost for such buildings, a reasonable rent could be charged."* ¹⁴

Housing for teachers during the Depression became less a problem than it was before because to make ends meet, homeowners started renting spare bedrooms. Teaching jobs in that decade were scarce and school funding short, so the word *teacherages* was fading into history. By the 1950s, driving long distances to work was more common, although in 2009, teacherage were in use at McKittrick and the Carrizo Plains School on Hwy. 58 in San Luis Obispo County.¹⁵

Retired-teacher housing was the topic in 1942 when Miss Gardett, who was secretary of Kern County Retired Teachers, read a letter from Maude McKee in which McKee proposed that KCRT buy a property for a

¹³ E.R. Harrington. A history of the organization and administration of kern county schools, doctoral dissertation. USC, 1963. p 194

¹⁴ *Morning Echo* (Bakersfield, California), Sep 15, 1920 (reprinted from *Taft Midway Driller*, Sep 14, 1920)

¹⁵ Thank you to historian and retired Kern County school district superintendent Jerry Kirkland for information about McKittrick and the Carrizo Plains School.

home for retired teachers. *"After some discussion,"* wrote Gardett, *"it was decided that since our membership is small [21 members then] and that the majority of our group own our homes, such an undertaking would be unnecessary and only work hardships."*¹⁶

Nevertheless the group was sympathetic to the plight of impoverished, retired teachers. In a letter read during the meeting of September 1949, a Dr. Andrus asked the group to send Christmas gifts to 10 retired teachers at the Teacher Retirement Home in Pasadena. At the December meeting, KCRT members brought wrapped packages, labeled as to their content, and voted to pay for shipping them to Pasadena. In February, KCRT wrote to the Pasadena Home asking for the names, birthdays, and hobbies of each resident.

The ranks of retired teachers are populated by notable lights. The woman who who asked for the gifts was 65 year-old Ethel Percy Andrus, PhD who had served a long and illustrious career in public education in Los Angeles.¹⁷ At the time she asked for the gifts she was director of the Southern California Teachers' Home, which she had founded in 1928. A reporter who once asked her for details was told, *"Those who have nothing need pay nothing. And all get a minimum of \$7.50 per month in spending money for church contributions and for the similar, tiny, fixed expenses of the aged. Our shoulders are broad. And we accomplish a good deal."*¹⁸

Times improved. The nation's economic prosperity from the end of WWII to the 1970s boosted wages and benefits and improved the quality of life for most, but those in retirement had missed the

¹⁶ *Board Minutes*, Kern County Retired Teachers Association, Jun 16, 1942

¹⁷ 1884-1967

¹⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, Mar 13, 1949. In 1947 Andrus founded the National Retired Teachers Association, and in 1954 she helped establish Gray Gables, a senior housing residence at Ojai, California. In 1958, at age 74, she founded the American Association of Retired Persons.

banquet. Over the last 20 years, the slump in real earnings, the loss of job security, and the evaporation of job benefits have caused young, prospective teachers and other citizens to question what happened.

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Origin of Kern Division, Alfred Harrell, 1924

By Gilbert Gia

In April 1936 Miss Laura Settle of the state retired-teacher organization met with nine Kern retired teachers. According to their first minutes book they *"voted to organize our retired teachers association. Mrs. Dolly Taylor was unanimously elected president. Mrs. Carrie Davis elected Vice President; Margaret F. McElroy elected secretary-treasurer. A meeting for organization to be called in the middle of May. --- Elizabeth Newell, secretary pro-tem."*¹⁹ In attendance were Mrs. Hampton, Mrs. Newell, Mrs. Willow, Mrs. Taylor, Mrs. Davis, Miss Gardette, Mrs. Sybrandt, Mrs. McElroy, and Mrs. Cora Bender, a retired school principal. Their second meeting was held in May at the Women's Rest House, which was a small, brick structure near the corner of 17th and Eye Streets. Women who shopped downtown and needed a quiet place to rest used that building, and it was used by women's groups. The public benefit happened without public funding.

Alfred Harrell, owner and publisher of the Bakersfield Californian, built the house in 1924 to honor women. At its dedication Harrell said, *"Some months since, in considering the ground where this building now stands, an area not required for the adjoining structure that houses The Californian's business, it occurred to me to utilize it for some needed, public service, and out of that thought has come the structure that is to be dedicated tonight to the service of the women of Kern county, to be at their disposal for all the years hereafter."*

¹⁹ 1936 Minutes Book, Kern Division, California Retired Teachers' Association

*"It is an inherent attribute of every man that he likes to justify his existence in the community in which he resides. I have lived all the years of my majority in Kern County, and there I expect to spend the remainder of my days. The associations that have come with an active life here are very near to me. No other place in all this world can ever be home; no other people can be just the same to me as are the people of Kern. In a small way I have prospered in my activities, and out of that modest prosperity, it affords me the greatest possible pleasure to have created this building for public service. "*²⁰

A year or so earlier, Harrell, in memory of his friend J.M. Jameson, benefited the public in another way when he built a drinking fountain on the corner of 17th and Eye, and it remained a well-recognized downtown feature for many years; in summers it was fed by an icing system that delivered cool water. The fountain was removed in the Fifties, but the Women's Rest House, although now structurally unsound for occupancy, still stands next to the Californian.

Harrell's generosity evokes the words of a young author of today named Amit Kalantri who said that acts of citizen charity question the worthiness of government. In spring 2015 the Kern County Board of Supervisors entertained the idea of reducing operating costs by turning over the the county's public library system to a for-profit company. The suggestion that library services will not be reduced is patently untrue. If the board's charity to county taxpayers happens by fiat, voters must question the worthiness and motivation of county government to help its entire people.

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²⁰ *Bakersfield Californian*, Nov 23, 1926

A Cuyama Outing, 1938²¹

In spring 1938 when Margaret B. Richardson joined the Retired Teachers of Kern County Club she increased the number of members to 10. For 31 years she had been postmistress at Cuyama, and for 17 of those years she was Cuyama's "school mistress." Mrs. Richardson and her husband would soon make possible the most distinctive outing yet held by the retired teachers' organization.

On a Sunday in May the teachers and their guests packed picnic baskets, and according to the old minutes book "*motored through winding and pleasant ways on a most delightful day.*" Wildflowers were encountered in perfusion as the motorcade made its way to Mr. and Mrs. Richardson's 1,000-acre Cuyama cattle ranch.

At 11:00 A.M., about 25 miles northwest of Maricopa, the group entered the ranch and were met with a cordial welcome. They visited with members of the family, explored the home, inspected the fruit cellar, and viewed flower-covered fields. At that time they learned that Mr. and Mrs. Richardson had come to the ranch as bride and bridegroom and that within the last few months had celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary there with 800 friends and relatives. Luncheon was presented at 1:30 on tables decorated with seasonal flowers. Club secretary Ada G. Hopkins recalled what the teachers had brought to the meal. "*Mrs. Newel and Miss Gardette had prepared ham, succotash, yams and other foods, and Mrs. Munsey, a guest, had arranged for ice cream and cookies. Others provided relishes and spreads. Mrs. Mach, with material from the ranch larder, made the excellent cornbread. Twenty-four partook of this feast.*"

Hiking and "*the taking of photographs*" followed, and later hours were devoted to reminiscences. The minutes book recalled, "*Near evening, we departed forth to resign the day to the darkness. On our return trip we were accompanied by*

²¹ Gilbert Gia wrote this from the 1938 Minutes Book of the Kern County Retired Teachers' Club. The story was published in Kern Division, CalRTA *Pulse* of Dec 2006.

members of the Richardson family to the new Wasiba Ja School building, an added joy and entertainment." That school, wrote the club secretary, was "modern in all details. This is a one-teacher school and has an enrollment of thirteen pupils. The day's hostess [Mrs. Richardson] is a former teacher of that community, which is proud of the new structure. This gathering of our group and guests will long be treasured in the minds of those who were privileged to be present."

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Retired Teachers' Vacations, 1938²²

Secretary Margaret Gardett wrote in the club's minutes book, *"In September 1938 the Kern County Retired Teachers Club met at Evelyn's Tea Room on K Street at California Avenue. Mrs. Cora Bender called on all members for vacation talks, and it was found that during the prior three months the 17 retired members present had done much traveling. "*

"Mrs. Elizabeth Newell visited Huntington Beach and motored into Old Mexico. Miss Ada Fisher spent three months in San Jose and Santa Cruz, and Mrs. George Taylor chose Huntington Lake and Mono Lake for short sojourns."

"Mrs. A.J. Pevestorff was a guest of relatives in Seattle. Mrs. A.C. Mack spent the summer boating and fishing at Balboa, and Mrs. J.A. Carnahan told of a trip to Yosemite and Lake Tahoe. Mrs. Martha Hampton visited a son and daughter in San Francisco and spent some time in Feather River Canyon. Mrs. Bender visited a daughter in Eugene, Oregon, and Mrs. Margaret Gardett spent several weeks on Greenhorn." [Note: Greenhorn Mountain then had a busy lodge.]

"Mrs. Lawrence Davis motored through Canada, Mrs. Sybrant took short trips north, and Mrs. Frances Willow, who vacationed in Los Angeles and at the beaches, also took a trip to Twenty-Nine Palms and Palm Springs." The minutes noted that "Mrs. Williams was brave enough to drive across the continent and return."

The guest speaker was Mr. Pat Kelly, Deputy County Superintendent and attendance officer. *"Mr. Kelly gave a very interesting informal talk emphasizing the relations between teacher, parent and pupil. His plea*

²² Gilbert Gia compiled this account from the Kern County Retired Teachers' Club 1938 Minutes Book. This peice was published in the Kern Div, CalRTA Pulse of Nov 2006.

was give the boy, or girl, the chance and he will make good. And the secretary concluded, "The afternoon passed all too soon!"

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Kern Division's First *Pulse*, 1961²³

Some years ago, retired principal and Kern Division past-president Fred Dukes wrote a summary of the organization's minutes books, the first of which was started in 1936.

Noting the year 1961-62 he wrote that 15 new members had joined, for a total membership of 270. Dukes continued, "*The Board met in September and acted to publish a newsletter to be named 'The Pulse.'* *The first edition was published on October 1, 1961, and it was edited by Carrie MacDonald, Division President. She wrote, 'Issuing a newsletter is but another addition to the years of growth in the history of the Kern Division, CRTA. We are naming this bulletin 'The Pulse' as suggested by Lily Watts. We think the name signifies our attempt to keep in touch with our members. Members of the board and section chairmen are enthusiastic about the year's program. We'll be hoping to see and hear from you. Be sure to give us news items for 'The Pulse.'* Dukes noted, "Someone also quipped that we are nothing without a pulse."

"*Included in this first issue was the Calendar of Events, program notes for October, names of new members, corrections, and news from the special interest sections, including Bible, Bridge, Art, and Travel. The Travel Section reported on their opening meeting at which time the year's program was planned. The highlight will be their March trip to Death Valley.*"

Dukes concluded, "*The first issue of 'The Pulse' was two mimeographed pages, and postage was three cents, First Class. The*

²³ Gilbert Gia wrote this article and it was published in the October 2010 CalRTA *Pulse*.

first ten years of 'The Pulse' have been carefully bound in two volumes with decorative plywood covers."

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(End of *Kern Teachers in Cameos, 1875-1961*)

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