

One Hundred Years at Hart Park, 1890-1990

Version Three

By Gilbert Peter Gia

Copyright © 2011, 2014, 2023 Gilbert Peter Gia, Bakersfield, California

This work is free to publicly-supported schools and libraries.

Commercial users contact Gilbert P. Gia, ggiaggia@gmail.com

In 1890 Capt. John Barker ran an active ranch on several hundred acres of river-bottom land about seven miles up river from Bakersfield. He died in 1909, and in 1915 his son-in-law Daniel Harris offered the western part of it to Kern County for \$30,000 [\$910,000]. The Board of Supervisors decided against it but in 1920 again had a chance, this time from owners Herman T. Miller and T.B. Wiseman. The Bakersfield Californian objected to the barren site and its twisting path to town; there were nearer and better camping places. Besides, it wrote, the "hot bend in the river" was no place to spend \$20,000 of tax money. The newspaper rallied the public against the purchase, but the rival Bakersfield Morning Echo said the Barker property would be a fine place for a public park, admitting, however, that the road needed work.¹

In 1921 Caledonia Masonic Lodge and the American Legion lobbied supervisors to buy the property, and on November 7, 1921 Kern County paid \$20,673.66 for 338 acres of the old Baker Ranch—equivalent to about \$353,000 in 2023 dollars.²

Community groups donated their time and energy to the new park, but it was only one of many places for leisure and recreation—

¹ Bakersfield Californian, Nov 9, 1921. Morning Echo, Sep 14, 1920

² Supervisors were James B. McFarland, James I. Waggy, Harry C. Rambo, Stanley Abel, and Ira M. Williams. John Oliver Hart was elected to the board in 1923.

tennis courts, plunges, golf courses, a fairgrounds, and private picnic grounds.³

Northwest view. hillside reservoir, left, bathhouses and barn, right., 1929

In 1926, Bakersfield Woman's Club urged the Board of Supervisors to improve a mineral spring that had been flowing down the park's hillside since the turn of the century. Mineral springs were popular, and families had ventured into Kern Canyon for several years for the hot springs, (In 1876 Bakersfield newspapers mentioned the larger ones: Dahlenega Health Resort, Democrat Hot Springs, and Hobo Hot Springs.)⁴ But by 1926 they were still hours away from Bakersfield.

Notable changes came to Kern River Park in 1927 when Kern County Supervisor John Oliver Hart became Park Superintendent and chair of the Park Committee.⁵ Among his first actions, with help from Supervisor J.B. McFarland, was the improvement of access from Bakersfield. The old trail from China Grade was re-graded as was an old trail east of the park that connected it to Kern Canyon Highway.⁶

Many projects were planned, and John Hart and horticulturist Charles N. Potter began a nursery and tree-planting program.⁷ In 1927 Kern County's old hospital at 19th and Oak was no longer in use, and some of the buildings were removed to the park for employee housing.⁸ A hillside reservoir was created, concrete standpipes built, and flood irrigation established. The county advertised for bids on a 12,000-gallon hillside tank, underground irrigation lines, electrical

3 Los Angeles Times, Dec 8, 1930. Associated Oil had a picnic ground and nine-hole golf course on the north side of Kern River across from today's soccer fields. Associated last used it about 1939-40. (Author's interview, Dean VanZant, 2003)

4 Hobo was renamed Miracle Hot Springs in 1947.

5 Hart took the job in 1927.

6 The road east of the park passed by Kern River Country Club, today the Foss-Kern Golf Course. See Gilbert Gia, "History of Boy Scouting in Kern County" www.HistoricBakersfeldAndKernCounty.com

7 The May 3, 1936 Bakersfield Californian named the species: cork oak, live oak, camphor, magnolia, red cedar, Atlantic cedar, Monterey cypress, pine arborvitae, bottle tree, California laurel, cedrus deodora, sequoia sempervirens, acacia, locust, Arizona cypress, silver maple, catalpa, poplar, sycamore, walnut, ash, and elm. The author's cousin said that one of Potter's daughters living in Germany stored her father's photo collection somewhere in California.

8 Bakersfield Californian, Jun 21, 1930

service, and sprinkler irrigation.⁹

A community picnic was held in the spring of 1928. The American Legion donated tables and a speaker's platform, and it built a huge barbecue pit. By then the park had a health spa, with six cabins, or "curative bathhouses", near the mineral flow.¹⁰ A rock fountain-house was built across the road, and it too flowed the mineral water.¹¹ On July 9, 1928, 850 campers and picnickers came to the park.¹²

North-facing view of the sand-bottomed reservoir with island, left, about 1932

Pool area to far right was converted to a concrete plunge in 1935.

The park had few trees and much open sky. It also had dirt roads, and on the grand opening of April 22, 1928 there was considerable dust. (Weeks later the county oiled the roads.) The opening – and the park had several --was held on Pleasure Island, a level, grassy field north of the bathhouses. That name is misleading today because the many sloughs there in 1928 were later changed by floods.

Hart promised a sand-bottomed swimming hole by the summer of 1928, but bidding did not start until June, and supervisors didn't expect it to be finished until September.¹³ Unlike Hart, the other supervisors preferred a deliberate, frugal approach to park spending, and although Hart lobbied hard for the pool, in October 1928 the project was scuttled in favor of enlarging the hillside reservoir. If enlarged to 100 x 600 feet, it would allow additional storage for irrigation, and it would accommodate swimming and boating.¹⁴

In November, trucks and power shovels expanded the reservoir, or hillside lake as it was then called, and the excavated fill deposited

9 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 2, 1928. In 1929 Hart made the motion to bring power to the park, construct the pipelines, and establish concessions. (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947)

10 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 2, 1928

11 Ibid. According to the Jun 21, 1930 Bakersfield Californian, the well "... came in in 1904 when wildcatters were drilling 800 feet for oil. The well now flows into an artificial lake, 300 by 700 feet in size, brilliantly lighted and equipped with 20 boats." Earthquakes of the 1952-53 stopped the well's flow.

12 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 9, 1928. See also *Bakersfield Californian*, Aug 12, 1929

13 Ibid. Hart made the motion to build the plunge.

14 Bakersfield Californian, Oct 23, 1928

along the main road. It creating an eight-by-six-hundred-foot dike that stands today. The south side of the expanded reservoir abutted the natural inclination of the hill, meaning no earth-moving was needed there.¹⁵ Hart and Potter hauled in two truckloads of cut lumber and built a safety barrier to keep young swimmers safe from the deep end of the reservoir. The rest of the lumber became tables and benches for the viewing area.

Water for the swimming hole/reservoir came from the flowing mineral-spring and an electric pump rated at 1200 gallons-per-minute that lifted river water to the reservoir.¹⁶ Hart boasted, "A clean sandy bottom will be provided for swimming, and conditions will be ideal. Before I get through I intend to make the park one of the county's finest amusement centers."¹⁷ In 1929 the county bought adjacent property, which increased the park's size to 363 acres.¹⁸

As the 1920s drew to a close, \$40,000 in county funds had been expended on the park, and the public remained quite supportive. Hart was always on the lookout for more attractions, and by 1929, he had added a café. That year, too, Lions Club decided that the Chamber of Commerce's historical collection should be displayed in a museum at Kern River Park.¹⁹

Pleasure Island. River is behind trees. 1929

The visitors were a diverse group. In the late-night and early-morning hours of summer 1929, mixed-sex, nude bathing happened at the reservoir, and it incensed John Hart. He warned, "You can't quote me too strongly on this matter, I am going to have three

15 Bakersfield Californian, Nov 3, 1928

16 Ibid. Hart noted that clam shells brought up from the drilling suggested that the area had once been a "great inland sea."

17 Bakersfield Californian, Oct 23, 1928

18 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934, p 7

19 Bakersfield Californian, Mar 6, 1929. In 1928 the Chamber of Commerce moved into its new building on Chester Avenue just north of Garces Circle. The building later became the home of the Kern County Museum. See Gilbert P. Gia, Fairs, Horses, and Cars (2023)

deputy sheriffs on the lookout at the Kern River park, and if anyone, man or woman, is caught bathing in the lake at that time of the day or night without a bathing suit, he or she will be arrested. I don't care who these mixed couples are. I have given instructions they will be taken immediately and locked up in the county jail to await the due course of the law." ²⁰

Hart intended to establish a wildlife zoo just north of the park on Goat Island, once was in the bed of the river.²¹ Said Hart, "Around the outer fence of the zoo I could build a driveway giving the public an opportunity to go around the island and inspect the animals."²² The road and auto bridges show on early maps, but they were never built, and the island never had a zoo. Destructive floods of the 1930s carried away Goat Island. In 1929 Hart built a zoo across the road from the big reservoir.

Goat Island and short slough, extreme top

Leslie Arnold who was Commissioner of the Californian Department of Fish and Game donated the first animal, a one year-old, pure-white doe, and Hart used it to promote the park. The Californian encouraged school children to submit names for the animal, and the winning name was John Doe, but John Doe turned out to be female.²³

Picnickers, about 1930

Another deer was donated, as well as a brown bear named Julia that was trailered in from Portland, Oregon. The county built a pen for donated elk, and with the go-ahead of Commissioner Arnold, four additional ones were accepted from the William Tracy Ranch at Buttonwillow.²⁴ An eagle was also donated, and the public went on to swamp Hart with non-native animals. Three additional deer donated

20 Bakersfield Californian, May 4, 1929

21 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 3, 1928, "Map Of County Park Complete"

22 Bakersfield Californian, Feb 2, 1930. See also Howard Gilkey's 1930 park map, Beale Memorial Library, McGuire Local History Room

23 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 26, 1928

24 Bakersfield Californian, May 24, 1929

came with guinea hens, peafowl, and a monkey from park concessionaire, Roland F. Hall.²⁵

Back in 1914 when T.N. Herbert's family was vacationing in Florida, his daughter was received a ten-inch, four month-old alligator. Eight years later her father no longer wanted it around, and he gave it to a San Joaquin Light and Power club. In 1928 the alligator was four feet long and too dangerous for the club, so they gave it to the park. Hart's proviso was they had to build a pool and brick cage for the fourteen year-old alligator.²⁶ It, the fully-stocked zoo, and bison attracted the public in waves.²⁷ On spring weekends in 1929, nearly two thousand visitors came to the park

In the late 1920s Hart accepted gold and silver Chinese pheasants from a bird farm at Chino, but they were not easily contained in cages, and escapes were so common that signs were posted forbidding shooting near the park boundaries.²⁸ The county was still in the business of raising game birds in the early 1960s, but by the early 1980s only the empty pens could be seen between the old buffalo stockade and the river.²⁹

Former park caretakers Lorraine Smock and her husband Stan recalled that when they left their park jobs after WWII, Perry and Barbara Denton were hired and moved into the adobe house next to the machine shop. They, too, cared for the park's pheasants, chuckers and quail. Stan recalled that after the Dentons left, Bud Squire took the job.³⁰

Mrs. William Tracy was in the process of reducing her ostrich herd in the late 1920s and donated five birds to the park. They adapted well and may have flourished were it not for the crush of people and cars. On a Sunday in 1927, two little girls (my mother and

25 Hall also operated the boat concession.

26 Bakersfield Californian, Oct 12, 1928, May 24, 1929

27 Horticulturist C.N. Potter said he would transform the alligator pond into "a water garden of hyacinths." Bakersfield Californian, Jun 21, 1930

28 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 3, 1948

29 Area encompassed by Bison Drive and River Road

30 Author's interview, Stan and Lorraine Smock, 2003

aunt) found an ostrich egg in the grass, and later while riding in the back seat of their daddy's Ford they peered over his shoulder as he idled along behind one of the big birds.³¹

In May of 1929 state game Warden Leslie Arnold donated three eagles and two ducks, veterinarian J. E. VanZant donated two African geese, and the Tracy family donated two Kern County elk. The wandering animals became so numerous that road signs were installed giving them right-of-way. Such an abundance of wild life was not a problem for fishermen. When the thirty-one-acre lake lagoon was completed in 1934, Kern County Fish and Game stocked it with 35,000 bass, catfish, and bluegill.³²

In the summer 1929 Kern's economy was healthy, and on a weekend in July, 2100 visitors came to the park. Supervisors needed a master-plan for growth, and they hired a well-regarded, thirty-nine-year-old landscape architect named Howard K. Gilkey³³ who had started his career as assistant in horticultural design for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition. His interview with Kern County supervisors was not recorded, but he likely told them the same thing he told a reporter in 1930. "The cost [*of park development*] may be spread over a term of years and cause no burden to the taxpayer."³⁴ In 1930, Wall Street was in disarray, and Kern County was feeling it, but by then Gilkey had a binding contract and he was surveying and drawing plans. He said, "We are living in an unstable world and planning for an uncertain future,"³⁵ but it had little effect on his detailed, comprehensive, and forward-thinking work. "The administration center of the park will be found almost exactly in the middle of the flatter portion of the site. Here will be the main field house, a lesser children's center, a museum, and terminating at the mall leading from the central plaza will be a boathouse. All the

31 Author's interview, Millie Gia Munding, 2002

32 Bakersfield Californian, Mar 8, 1934

33 Bakersfield Californian, Oct 21, 1929

34 Bakersfield Californian, Feb 4, 1930

35 Ibid.

buildings are to comprise a simple, unified architectural composition having certain elements in common, notably roofs of hand-made tile, walls of rough plaster, whitewashed, and logs hand-hewn for beams and piers.”³⁶ Gilkey planned for a restaurant, medicinal baths, and open-air swimming with a pool for children. In September the board accepted his drawings and specifications.

In 1930 Hart obtained a white sugar pine log from Greenhorn Mountain and built a dug-out canoe. The Pioneer was launched in the hillside reservoir and became the park’s first amusement ride. Hart added more attractions. The public wanted more.³⁷

Chairman of the Bank of America Leo G. Pauly wrote, "State engineers and the Board of Supervisors visualize a playground park extending from the Fair Grounds on North Chester Avenue to the park eight miles upriver. The natural beauty and advantages it possesses along with the fine soil which with proper development will make it in time a close rival to the great Golden Gate Park. The main park of 345 acres is now planted with over 6,000 trees and shrubs, donations from the state, local organizations and individuals. There have also been donated a number of rare birds and animals. The beginnings of that will someday be an interesting zoo. Now it has a lake of about three acres or more with water five-feet deep and fed by a flowing sulfur water well and by water pumped from the river. It has a fleet of row-boats, which were donations from enthusiasts and are free for using.”³⁸ Hart had been a county supervisor for sixteen years, and in 1930 he stood for re-reelection on his record of park development. The Californian counted the accomplishments: Developed mineral spring, groves of memorial trees, hillside lake, buffaloes, ostriches, and a zoo.

In 1930 Hart said, "It is my ambition now to finish the work I

36 Ibid. The museum was part of park planning. Bakersfield Californian, Apr 30, 1920

37 Bakersfield Californian, Jun 31, 1930

38 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 6, 1930. The enthusiasts were King Lumber Company, American Legion, K&W Furniture Co, and Bakersfield Sandstone Brick. Bakersfield Californian, May 4, 1929. Forty-one organizations planted trees. Bakersfield Californian, June 21, 1930

have started at the county park. I believe this work will be of value to every person in the county, and it is my sincere hope that I shall be allowed to finish it."³⁹ Hart probably emphasized the word "hope" because county spending was then in free fall, park patronage slowed, concessions closed. Undismayed, Hart tapped the community for support.

The park projects between 1921 and 1930 were dwarfed by Federal make-work programs of the 1930s, and those accomplishments have not been equaled since. By 1935, State Emergency Relief Administration spent \$250,000, equivalent to \$5.7M in 2023 dollars.⁴⁰

Sometime in 1931 Kern County Deputy Surveyor R.E. White drew plans for a 1700s Italian-style waterwheel. The Californian said the wheel was "...installed in the channel between the mainland and the island."⁴¹ The word island was appropriate in 1933 because the park then had many-more water channels than it has today.

In 1932-1933 WPA and SERA workers assembled the wheel (or mill) from hand-hewed mountain logs. Its number-one heart-redwood paddles were soaked in linseed oil for six weeks. Workers used nearly 2100 brass screws to assemble it. The finished wheel was five feet wide and twenty-one feet tall, and the carpenters were paid \$1.75 (\$38.40) a day, but it was the many volunteers who helped complete it in five weeks.⁴²

The water course turned the wheel seven revolutions per minute and was rated thirty-eight HP. A step-up gearbox drove a water pump 1400 RPM that raised water to the hillside reservoir. The wheel also generated electricity, but exactly how long that lasted is speculation.

39 Bakersfield Californian, Jan 27, 1930

40 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934

41 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934, "Kern Recreation Area Now One Of The Best In The Area"

42 *Bakersfield County, Proud of Kern County*, 1933, 1966, vol 1 (Beale Memorial Library, McGuire Local History room). Bakersfield Californian, Aug 15, 1942. Funding and labor from SERA (California State Emergency Relief Act), CWA (Civil Works Administration), and WPA (Works Project Administration) created almost all park projects of the 1930s; Down Memory Lane, Hopson Mortuary, Bakersfield, California. Bakersfield Californian, 1946. (Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, California)

The floods of 1936 and 1937 damaged the wheel, obliterated Goat Island, and reduced water flow through the wheel's channel. In 1950 both suffered more flood damage. After the floods of the 1930s the water course weakened, and it became much less obvious why the wheel was placed there.

Lake construction was the most ambitious project. In the summer of 1930 Kern County obtained water rights from Miller & Lux and the Kern County Land Company, and in 1934 excavation started. It was supposed to have been thirty-five acres but was scaled back to sixteen acres. Water rights remained unchanged.⁴³

Gilkey's 1929 park lake map, above; 2009 aerial image of lake, below

Men earning a dollar a day used wheelbarrows, picks, and shovels to create the lake and its 212-foot supply channel.⁴⁴ They build an eight-foot-high, arched masonry culvert, a reinforced concrete, thirty-foot spillway, and an arched-masonry road bridge, all of which remain today.⁴⁵ The waterwheel gradually collapsed and by 2023 was gone.

Bridge at west end of lake. Water returns to river at this point.

Workers also built five timber bridges "of various design" to connect the "mainland to the island", which in this case meant the island in the lake. To the west they built a 200 by 400-foot parking lot and a 100 by 400-foot lily pond, both in use today. By the mid-1930s, 500 workers expended 188,000 man-hours.⁴⁶ In 1941 the last

1933, 1938

43 Bakersfield Californian, Jun 31, 1930. Minutes of the Clerk of the Board, Jul 17, 1932, places the future lake in Sec 36, T28S, R28E.

44 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947

45 Extent in 2009

46 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934. After Hart's death, park development continued under County Supervisor J. A. Hinman and H. D. Pope who was supervising engineer of county projects for the State Emergency Relief Administration.

Depression-era structure built was the west-entrance gateway.⁴⁷

Frank Stramler recalled, "When I started there in 1959 as park superintendent, the mill [*waterwheel*] was in pretty good shape. It was originally built to be operational, to pump water up to the reservoir and to the tanks on the hill. But about once a year we had to bring in our crane, drag lines, and big cat and push the sediment up out of the canal. The wheel house still had the belt or chain drive to generate current, but the water flow was never enough to produce much power. The wheel stopped making electricity while I was there. It still turned though, and it was still an aesthetic feature of the park. We had to turn the paddle wheel to get it to soak-up water because the bottom paddles would get water-logged from standing still in the water so long. It was unbalanced and wouldn't turn. We had to spray it with the sprinklers to try to keep the top paddles from drying out." Around 2001, Nancy Twisselman became interested in preserving the wheel and she told me that an electric water pump was installed in the wheel house to make the wheel turn.⁴⁸

In January 2011 the seventy-eight-year-old mill was on the verge of collapsing, and a county employee suggested that the only thing supporting it was the termites holding hands, but there little doubt that waterwheel was past the point of preservation. Anyone interested in replicating the mill will find R.E. White's working drawings at the county's engineering office at M and Golden State Avenue.

George Gilbert Lynch, 2006Photo credit: Gilbert Gia

Gus and Pearl Balasis owned Pearl's Cash Grocery at 17th and O streets. In 1934 Kern's economy was so bad that customers were unable to pay on their charge accounts, and the Balasis went out of business. Daughter Irene recalled, "First we moved in with my

47 Bakersfield Californian, Jan 1, 1941

48 Author's interview, Nancy Twisselman, 2003

grandparents. Then after a few months my dad's friend Percy Branson who was the manager of Kern River Park told him about a job at the park."⁴⁹

1935 letter re John Hart's canoe, the Pioneer

Irene's brother Gus explained, "In 1935 when I was about ten years-old we moved into a house trailer there. I remember my dad started working at the park with Lloyd Snyder who had the bicycle shop in town. Lloyd was bringing bikes to the park and renting them out."⁵⁰ Before much longer, Balasis, Snyder, and Branson were running the park's bicycle and food concessions.

Gus: "After we moved, we put up a lunch stand at the east end of the lake, and later-on another stand on the west end where the boat docks are. In 1935 we moved the stand at the east end of the lake up on the hill where they were building the new swimming pool. My mother served the work crews full lunches, 25 cents a plate."⁵¹

George Gilbert Lynch at Girl Scout fire pit, 2006

In May 1935, 5000 visitors came to the Annual Celebration of the Dedication of the People's Playground. A souvenir program highlighted upgrades to the park and identified Cecil Hess as manager of the new zoo then under construction across from the new swimming pool.

Irene recalled 1936 when the park had several live-in employees. "Superintendent Branson and his assistant Merle Stoops each had their houses down from the swimming pool, and just east of that was the drinking-fountain building made out of river rock. The park caretaker Joe Claudino his wife Lillian and their children, Dorothy, Bobby, Joe Jr., and Margie lived in a smaller wood-frame house. Our little trailer was off the beaten path down by the river past the mill and next to where the park police building is today."⁵² The trailer had a breezeway

⁴⁹ Author's interview, Gus Balasis and Irene Balasis Restituto, Mar 2003

⁵⁰ Author's interview, Gus Balasis and Irene Balasis Restituto, Mar 2003

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² This suggests that the park's police buildings were constructed after 1936.

connected to a tent with a wooden floor."⁵³

Irene loved the quiet, beautiful park. On the bluff behind the plunge she and Gus dug for shark teeth and bought warm milk and cheese from an old sheep herder named Pete who lived in a shack near the park. Irene recalled, "My mom had to get water from the river to wash our clothes, and the Branson's had the only phone in the park. When I knocked on their back door to ask to use it, I always wanted to see inside their whole house."

Frank Stramler was park superintendent in 1959, and he and his family then lived in the superintendent's house. "I think the house might have been a chicken-dinner place once. The living room was big, 20x40 feet, and it had a big fireplace in the middle of the long wall. It had cloakrooms on either side of this big room, and all along the walls were light fixtures that would have been for booths. Percy Branson lived at that house before me. Another house that was nearby was for the assistant superintendent, and there was also another house for a foreman. It was to the northeast by the main shop that was next to the river. Charlie Salazar lived there. Later on, my house and most of the others burned down."⁵⁴

The Stramler's house had been a diner with a dance floor and large fireplace. The park's first concessionaire, Rowen F. Hall, opened the Hen House on June 14, 1929. The rustic-looking café served fried chicken and steak dinners from 5 p.m. until midnight and accommodated fifty customers.⁵⁵

River-rock tower-fountain, left-center. Water-filter house, far left, about 1930

⁵³ Author's interview, Gus Balasis and Irene Balasis Restituto, Mar 2003

⁵⁴ Author's interview, Frank Stramler, Nov 2003

⁵⁵ "Hen House Opens at Kern River Park," Bakersfield Californian, Jun 13, 1929

The Kern River flooded in 1936. Gus recalled, "It started rising, and then they got a tractor and pulled our trailer house across the little bridge to higher ground. But they couldn't move our tent house." Said Irene, "My brother and I had button-boxes full of shark teeth that we'd collected. After the water went down, we went back to our tent and saw that we'd lost all of our collection. Most of the other things that were in the tent were gone, too."

In the summers Irene's cousin Connie Basbis worked for the Balasis' food concessions. Connie thought about the park. "When I was out there in the late 1930s, the only things going on were the food stand, the plunge, the little zoo, and the bikes."⁵⁶ But by the end of the Thirties the economy was on the mend, and the Balasis were making some money.

In the mid-1930s the zoo had a fox, badgers, several deer, and elk. Two or three buffalo were in a stockade near the game-bird cages. Gus recalled the monkeys: "King was a sweet one, but the spider monkey, Jim, would try to bite you."⁵⁷ King and Jim were spider, or chino monkeys, and Jimmy and Baby were baboons. The zoo also had mandarin and golden ring-neck pheasants, peacocks, two owls (Punch and Judy), some roughneck and fantail pigeons, one black gander, guinea hens, and ostriches.

In 1936 additional bison were brought in from Montana. Gus: "Across from the shops in 1936 there was a big pen that had maybe two or three bison. The board fence was strong, but when the bison got worked up they rammed the enclosure. It was pretty exciting." Darrell Francis, also remembered the large animals. "Northwest of the old waterwheel and across from the shops was a large animal area

⁵⁶ Author's interview, Connie Basbis Pappas, Aug, 2003

⁵⁷ Author's interview, Gus Balasis and Irene Balasis Restituto, Mar 2003

with elk. At times, one bull elk in particular was mean and dangerous. He was in rut and the cows were in heat. Nobody ever got hurt from the bull, but they wound up shooting him. It was a shame because that animal wasn't doing anything but being an elk."⁵⁸

The oil boom at the turn of the century gave Kern resident low tax rates, and the county's largess gave them one of the most magnificent court houses in California. In 1927, when the Board of Supervisors voted against building a concrete swimming pool at the park, Supervisor Hart suggested that the county write the state for information about swimming pools. Construction of a concrete plunge started several years later, but Hart never lived to see it.⁵⁹

In February 1935, Kern County money and more from the State Emergency Relief Act improved the underground irrigation system and started work on the concrete swimming plunge, which would take up the east end of the mud reservoir. Recalling that time, Gus Balasis said, "They built a wall on the east side of the reservoir that became a sort of island between it and the new pool. The straight embankment separated the new plunge from the rest of the reservoir, and once a week, plunge water was emptied into it."⁶⁰ Vestiges of the wall can be located today.

By today's standards the plunge was odd shaped. It was about twelve-feet deep on the squared-off west side and one-inch deep on its east end near the bath house. Those who worked there told me the bottom was funnel-shaped. River water entered from the shallow, east end and exited on the west into the reservoir. One-meter and three-meter diving boards were on the northwest apron.⁶¹

Fifteen months after the plunge work started, Kern County Farm Bureau held a picnic at Kern River Park. The Californian wrote, "The greatest attraction at the picnic this year probably will be the immense

58 Author's interview, Darrell Francis, 2003. In 2003 Francis was a guide for Tejon Ranch.

59 John Oliver Hart died June 16, 1934.

60 My interview with Gus Balasis, 2003

61 Bakersfield Californian, May 4, 1936: The pool ranged from about one inch to 12 feet, covered two acres, and was built "with an assistance of WPA and SRA labor."

swimming pool at the Kern River Park. This pool is of concrete construction and covers an area of about an acre and a quarter. The upper end of the pool was chained off for use of children, and the deep water end was for adults and good swimmers."⁶² That day 12,000 visitors turned out for the Second Annual Celebration of the Opening of the People's Playground. An actual count showed 2,065 persons enjoyed the cool waters of the big new plunge, one of the largest in California."⁶³ Gus Balasis recalled lifeguards Leroy Finley, Ernie Combs, Jack Jordan, and Art Brinner. Said Balasis, "They hired me as a junior lifeguard, junior because I wasn't old enough to qualify for the regular lifeguard position."

During construction, SERA also built an adobe locker building just to the east of the plunge. Dale Hopwood recalled, "Those changing rooms were mostly without roofs, but most of the women's locker rooms were covered."⁶⁴ Gus Balasis: "After swimmers left the changing rooms, they had to walk through a foot bath to get to the pool. We called it sheep dip."⁶⁵

A children's day camp was held at the park in the 1940s. Blanche Molinaro Actis recalled, "Bob Blanton picked up us kids at Jastro Park and drove the city recreation bus to Hart Park. We did crafts and swam for the day. When I stepped out of the pool's bathhouse to go into the water, I had to walk across a ten-foot concrete ramp, and I remember it was very hot on my bare feet. There was some more hot concrete apron on the side that faced the hill, but not so much on the side near the main road."⁶⁶ (The public viewing platform was there.)

A tethered, metal water toy called the Red Top was between the shallow end and the deep and was fitted with a steering wheel which swimmers operated to make it spin. A lifeguard tower was in the

62 Bakersfield Californian, May 16, 1936

63 Bakersfield Californian, May 17, 1936

64 Author's interview, Dale Hopwood, 2006

65 Author's interview, Gus Balasis, 2003

66 Author's interview, Blanche Molinaro Actis, 2003

middle of the plunge (visible in image above), and four more were around the sides.

Dick Brown and Ronald "Doc" Lockyer lifeguarded in 1945 and in 1946. ⁶⁷ Their friend Dean VanZant recalled helping them treat the pool. After closing the pool in the evening they loaded lime sacks into a row boat, and as one rowed, the other dusted lime powder into the water. Said VanZant, "In the morning, it was hard to tell if the lime was effective. The pool was huge. I remember that Brown claimed it held a little more than 3,000,000 gallons."⁶⁸

Californian's map for Sheriff's Barbecue, 1941

In 1947 Darrell Francis was pool manager, and for the next seven summers he lifeguarded with Cal Druey, Owen Nelson and Gary Morris. Francis described cleaning the plunge: "The deep end was next to the barrier that separated the pool from the reservoir. We'd pull out sections from that wall and let the water spill into the reservoir. That took care of the top five feet of water. After that we opened a wheel-driven valve underneath the wall, and the rest of the water drained off into the boat lake that was down the hill on the other side of the road. We started draining on Sunday afternoon and tried to get the water-level down pretty far by dark. Then we came back on Monday morning about 4:30 or 5:00 AM to clean the walls and bottom."⁶⁹

Federal and State Depression-era projects were scheduled so so as not to compete with private business. Much of the work was done by unskilled labor, which may have been why the plunge had cleaning problems. The walls and floor were rough finished. Francis explained, "They didn't build the pool like they're built today with a series of coats. We had to use four fire hoses powered by water from the holding tank up on the hillside to clean the inside of it. Those hoses

67 Brown became pool manager in 1954.

68 Author's interview, Dean VanZant, 2004

69 Author's interview, Darrell Francis, 2009

had so much pressure that it was a strain for one man to hold on. We literally blew the moss and algae off the sides of the pool."⁷⁰

The City of Bakersfield operated three sanitary, chlorinated park pools in 1938, but the untreated Kern River Park plunge built in 1936 remained a health-and-safety hazard for many years. Its water came from mountain snow packs, and by the time it filled the Kern River Park plunge it was far from pristine. A week after cleaning, it had a heavy burden of algae and mud and a distinct off-odor. Even after cleaning, the pool offered surprises—such as live crawdads. Francis: "The intake pipe just had a hardware-cloth screen to keep the larger tree branches out of the pool, so plenty of things passed through -- fish, frogs, even snakes." The public told jokes about the water, but it did not discourage its use. In the summer of 1948 between 40,000 and 50,000 people a week came to the park, and the patronage is probably why the county spent \$35,000 (\$440,000) on pool improvements, but none of them on a chlorinating system.⁷¹

In summer 1953 four life guards and hundreds of swimmers were there when an eleven year-old boy who could not swim jumped into the eight-foot end.⁷² Several minutes passed before his body was found. Roxana Francis recalled, "It was impossible to see more than six inches below the surface, and the water was at least six feet deep there where that boy went in."⁷³ Darrell Francis: "Every year I was manager I had to make a report on the pool and what it needed. I always told them it was unsafe, that the water clarity was really bad. It was a major safety problem because you couldn't always see the bottom by the end of the week." In fact, the drowning was the second there in eight years.⁷⁴

70

Ibid.

71 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 3, 1948

72 Another account attributed the death to horseplay.

73 Author's interview, Darrell and Roxana Francis, 2003

74 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 3, 1953. The earlier death was not a drowning. In summer 1945 a 20 year-old veteran, who only weeks earlier had been released from a Navy hospital, slipped while diving and hit his head on the plunge coping. Bakersfield Californian, Jul 6, 1945

Joan Potter, first female lifeguard, 1954

In summer 1954, eighteen year-old Joan Potter became the pool's first female lifeguard.⁷⁵ She partnered with four male lifeguards, and all were needed. Said Cal Druey, "Some weekends in 1956 we had 1,000 people in the plunge. There were many times that somebody would panic that their child had drowned in the pool only to find out later that the kid was in the restroom. The water was usually murky, and it was up to the lifeguards to keep swimmers in view. One summer there were two guys who had been jumping into the pool with tubes. One of them got into trouble and went down. I dove in and tried to get under him to bring him up. The problem was that his buddy jumped in to help him, and then his buddy lost his tube and went under, too. Turned out neither one of them could swim. I was 180 pounds, and each of them was about 150, but I was a strong swimmer. I got my hand around one of them, and I got the other one by the hair. I started to put them to the edge, but they both got hold of me, and I went under. I was in trouble. I would've drowned with both of them if a 14 year-old girl hadn't thrown us a buoy with a rope and pulled us in."⁷⁶

Roxana Francis told about the man who told a lifeguard he'd lost his false teeth in the plunge. "They dove in to look for his plate, but it didn't do much good because the water was so bad. They told him to come back Monday when the pool was drained. Sure enough when he showed up, the teeth were in a half-inch of water right about where he thought they'd be. He climbed down the ladder, picked them up, and put them back in this mouth."⁷⁷ Doris Hopwood Dunham recalled the pool in 1960 when she lifeguarded there. She shook her head, "The water was really something. At the northeast corner "fresh" river water boiled up out of pipe, and because it was cleaner than the rest of the pool a lot of people liked to sit by it. By Wednesday the

⁷⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 25, 1954

⁷⁶ Author's interview, Cal Druey, 2003

⁷⁷ Author's interview, Darrell and Roxana Francis, 2003

lifeguards stayed out of the water as much as they could."⁷⁸

In 1955-1956 Kern County Parks and Recreation added an aeration tower and a chlorinating system to the drinking water system. It is not known if the county chlorinated the pool, but the pool's office did get a new floor safe.

When Cal Druey managed from 1956 to 1959, most of the life guards were East Bakersfield High students. Included were Doris Hopwood, Dale Hopwood, Bob Jellison, Fred Perry, Norman Davis, and Bobby and David Brown. Dale Hopwood recalled, "The plunge was 210 by 330-feet. [*Surface area of about 1.6 acres*] Water came in from the northeast corner and drained into the overflow side at the west end of the pool. There, the water spilled over into the reservoir. At least one-third of the pool, mostly along the south edge, was less than two feet deep. To the west it went from three feet to twelve feet deep. I think some water was going into it all the time, but you couldn't notice it. I know that they ran water in and out of it at night."⁷⁹

Hopwood continued, "The water was pretty murky by the end of the week, and by Sunday it was really icky. They started draining it on Sunday afternoon, and some of us came back on Monday to do the dirty job of hosing off the rough walls. Sections of the wall had different colors because the cement had been mixed by hand and the proportion of cement to sand was different from batch to batch. Later on, after the pool was filled, we poured in 50-gallon drums of HTH chlorine to try to sanitize it , but the water was never right."

Frank Stramler who was Superintendent of Kern County Parks from 1959 to 1968, said that improvements to the plunge would have cost the county about \$30,000 and supervisors didn't want the expense. Stramler recalled that somebody complained about the plunge not being properly chlorinated, and sometime after 1961 the county closed it for swimming.⁸⁰

There was still life in the old plunge. In 1969-1970 Bakersfield

78 Author's interview, Doris Hopwood Dunham, Jan 2011

79 Author's interview, Dale Hopwood, 2003

80 Author's interview, Frank Stramler, 2003

businessman John Barber bought a 2,000-lb, seven year-old hippopotamus from a Los Angeles resident named Ronnie Hochleutner who had hoped to make some money from it, but the hippo's feed bills spoiled Ronnie's dreams. Barber donated the hippo to Bakersfield Zoo Society, they talked with the county, and Frank Stramler arranged to house Sam the Hippo in the old Hart Park plunge.⁸¹ Sam did not stay very long. By December he was in a new pen and pool at Metro Park north of the Kern County Museum.⁸² Later, Sam went to Larson's Dairy to live with the cows.⁸³

In the early 1980s the county tried to make the old plunge useful. Stramler: "We put in Water World, which was a water theme park. From the top of a big waterside, kids splashed down into a small tank of treated water next to the unused swimming pool. Paul Woollomes rented bumper boats there, but Water World didn't pay for itself." In 1992 the pool was back filled, and an equipment-yard parking lot built on top of it.

"Kern River Yacht Club" concession, 1949 Photo credit: Dale Schwamborn

Two annual events at the park before WWII were the Sheriff's Posse Barbecue and the Kern County Fish and Game Barbecue. The Sheriff's barbecue of August 25, 1940 attracted 21,000 people, the greatest number ever to come the park in a single day. Sheriff John E. Loustalot sold 11,000 barbecue tickets, and the 10,000 who did not buy tickets were there to see Hollywood actors Buck Jones and Clark Gable. he was skeet shooting, equestrian shows, dancing, a beauty contest, and boat races. Gus Balasis told me he watched the Sheriff's Posse, North Kern Riders, Kern County Rangers, and Las Rancherias descend in single file from the bluff above the plunge.⁸⁴

Gus: "About 1940 my father bought the bike concession from [Lloyd] Snyder. I remember going down to Los Angeles with Dad to

⁸¹ Bakersfield Californian, Nov 7, 1969

⁸² Bakersfield Californian, Dec 2, 1969

⁸³ Author's interview, Kathy Munding McCollister, 2002

⁸⁴ Author's interview, Gus Balasis, 2003

buy more bicycles from the Shelby Bicycle Company. One of their girl models [*girl's bike*] was popular because a movie star named Shirley Temple had one. Dad also had Red Devil acrobatic bikes and Igo scooters for rent. The Igo didn't have a seat or a chain or pedals. The frame flexed when you stood on it. The back wheel was a little off center, so you'd push off to get it going and then jump on. With that eccentric axle in the back you could catch a bouncing rhythm and make the Igo pick up speed."⁸⁵

Mrs. Ramirez, center, and friends, early 1950s

Photo credit: Arnold Ramirez

Gus said his father had problems with the bike rental. "Once in a while my dad had to go out and round up his bikes. If a bike had a flat or it broke down, some people would just leave it lying somewhere by the side of the road. We found our bikes all the way out in East Bakersfield."⁸⁶ The bike rentals were just the beginning. About 1940 Balasis brought amusement rides to the park. Said Connie Basbis Pappas, "My uncle bought a wooden merry-go-round from the East and put it together one piece at a time."⁸⁷ Gus: " After that my father hired a company to design a wooden roller coaster, and he also put in a Ferris wheel. Later, he bought a much bigger roller coaster made out of metal, and after that we had the kiddy rides, the little train, a tilt-a-wheel, and the electric bumper cars."⁸⁸ Gilbert Gia remembers the bumper cars at night with their "zit-zit" arcing sparks, smell of burned metal, and flashes of blue light that lit-up the metal ceiling and the faces of drivers as they crashed their cars together.

Mrs. Ramirez, third from left, and friends, early 1950s

Photo credit: Arnold Ramirez

Gus helped his father in the winter refurbishing the rides, but when the war started, gasoline was rationed, and fewer visitors came to the park. Young Gus joined the Navy, and his father kept the rides going by himself. One summer ten year-old Blanche Molinaro was sure

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Author's interview, Connie Basbis Pappas, Aug, 2003

⁸⁸ Author's interview, Gus Balasis, 2003

that Mr. Balasis was everywhere at the same time. "When I was a kid, he cooked hamburgers, sold tickets and operated all the rides. Sometimes if you wanted to ride the Ferris Wheel or the merry-Go-Round, you had to wait until he finished driving the little train around the loop."⁸⁹ By the time Gus returned from the war his father was in poor health and talking about selling the concessions.

Paul Woollomes served in the 376th Engineering Battalion that supplied fuel for General Patton's tanks in Europe. Said Woollomes, "I came back in 1946, and my dad told me that Percy Branson wanted to see me."⁹⁰ Branson said that Gus Balasis had 1/3 interest in the concessions and that he, Branson, had 2/3 interest. Branson said his financial interest in the concessions was at odds with his county job. I bought half of his 2/3rds interest, and that's how I got to be a partner with them. Later on I bought them both out."⁹¹ Woollomes operated the concessions for the next 60 years.

In 1946 when Stan and Lorraine Smock were park caretakers, the park's giant lawn basins were irrigated by flooding. One of Stan's jobs was to prevent the flooded basins from washing out, and if water got into a ground-squirrel hole it meant an earthen bank might give away like a collapsing dam. "We never tried to poison those squirrels," said Stan, "but we had to keep a sharp eye out for their burrowing." Stan was also the park's night watchman, and on his first night he got a scare. Recalling that night he said, "The park closed at 10 and it was dark out there. I kept hearing people crying Help! Help! It didn't take me very long to figure out where the cries were coming from. Those peacocks called Help! all that night."⁹²

Peacock near old waterwheel, 2006

The park well used before the war, and after the war the attendance doubled. On an average summer Sunday in 1947 the park

89 Author's interview, Blanche Molinaro Actis, 2002

90 Paul Woollomes' father was Roy Woollomes, Kern County Supervisor.

91 Author's interview, Paul Woollomes, Feb 2003

92 Author's interview, Stan and Lorraine Smock, 2003

had somewhat more than 20,000 people.⁹³ Families were grateful the country was again at peace, and they delighted in the park's amenities—plunge, sulfur baths, boating, fishing, concessions, kid rides, and fireplaces with free wood.

In the summer of 1947 the Kern County Board of Supervisors renamed the river park John O. Hart Memorial Park. State Senator Jess R. Dorsey had requested the change of name, but credit for it happening belonged to the entire community of grateful citizens.⁹⁴ Bakersfield City Councilman Gus Vercammen summed up feelings when he said, "We thought a lot of Johnnie Hart over here."⁹⁵

The park accepted more animals for the zoo. A bear was among the first, followed by a mountain lion that Bill Lachenmaier of Shafter roped in Arizona. In the summer of 1948 between 40,000 and 50,000 people came to Hart Park every week. It was four times any count before the war.

Besides fishing, swimming, picnicking, and mechanical rides, the park also rented horses and donkeys. Paul Woollomes recalled the Lena Webb Riding Academy that was located on a modest rise at the east end of the park on Hill Road, where horses and donkeys were stabled in a red barn.⁹⁶ Kept there as well was a milk cow that belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Luther Brown, who were park caretakers. Said Woollomes, "I had a horse up there, too, a Morgan gelding that was too much for my sister, so I took him. I used to ride him up Kern Canyon and into the mountains when I went hunting."⁹⁷

The zoo's food budget was hit and miss, and not surprisingly the monkeys got most of their food from park visitors. The troop must have eaten well because Darrell Francis watched their population grow. "Around 1950 there were plenty of monkeys, maybe three or four kinds, but the cage arrangement wasn't well thought out.

93 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947

94 Dorsey probably requested that in mid-July. Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947

95 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 17, 1947

96 Author's interview, Nancy Twisselman, Jun 2003. She said equestrian enthusiast John Hoffstader restored the barn.

97 Author's interview, Paul Woollomes, 2003

Standing on top of the diving board at the plunge we could look across the road and see the zoo down below. They'd put the lion's cage right up next to the monkeys', and those monkeys were always reaching across and pulling the old lion's tail, so there was sometimes a lot of noise over there." Francis paused a moment. "The lion finally got fed up with it, and caught the monkey's arm, and well...he bit it off. We took the little fellow to Sterns Veterinarian hospital where Walter Richard anesthetized the animal, sewed him up, and kept him there for a few days. When Walter brought the monkey back, they put him in the same cage. That monkey never learned anything from the experience. He started pulling the lion's tail again, with his one good arm, and the lion got him again. We named the poor little fellow our two-legged, two-strikes monkey. After that they moved the cages. Didn't want to take any more chances." ⁹⁸

Paul Woollomes recollected the late 1930s when park concessionaire Wesley F. Waldon acquired a park train from "somebody up north." In 1940, Waldon along with park manager Percy Branson and Gus Balasis partnered in the train concession. Balasis' son Gus described his father's part. "My dad had two jobs before the war. He was a mechanic for the Southern Pacific Railroad and a working partner in the park concessions. I remember he got a couple of his friends from the SP shop to help him lay the train's half mile track. And I watched them install a Crosley car motor in an engine that wasn't running."⁹⁹

In the summer 1940, Engine No. 999 left the park train station for its maiden run with two cars. That day those two cars carried several hundred passengers, and within weeks the concession was well on its way of satisfying Wes Waldon's annual goal of selling 100,000 tickets. His unofficial title was Kern River Railroad President and Mechanical Superintendent. In November, after Peggy Wofford drove No. 999 out for the last run of the season, Waldon counted the

⁹⁸ Darrell Francis email to the author. The park's only first aid station was at the plunge.

⁹⁹ Author's interview, Gus Balasis, 2003

earnings: Five months of operation had netted \$2150 (\$47,000) from the sale of 43,000 five-cent tickets. The Kern County tax collector took \$340.¹⁰⁰ In April 1942, two weeks into the train's second season, Waldon sold only 1760 tickets.¹⁰¹ If it had been a normal April, he would have sold more, but America was at war.

Paul Woollomes returned from the war in 1946 and was told that Wes Walden had bought California Hot Springs and was planning to move the little train up there. Woollomes recalled, "The County Board of Supervisors wanted to find a way to keep the train at the park. My dad [*Roy Woollomes*] was on the Board of Supervisors, and he suggested I look into the train as an investment. I did, and I bought Branson's share of the train. That's why it stayed at the park."¹⁰²

Lorraine Smock described the train's half-mile route. "The station was south of the water-wheel and across the street from the merry-go-round. The track went over a bridge and past an adobe house that's now used as the police building. The little train made a loop out along the river, and it got so close to the edge we thought we'd fall in. The tunnel came next, really a wooden shed with doors open at both ends where Gus Balasis stored the engine at night. After the tunnel, the train made a little turn and pulled back into the station."¹⁰³

Park caretaker Lorraine Smock driving train, 1946

Others recalled the route, too, but few of them knew about the engines. Little-train experts Don Micheletti and Keith Taylor told me that the cab Lorraine Smock sits in [above] was a Cagney. Around 1910 the Wagner Company sold a few defective cabs whose engines exploded. Some were repaired and put back in service with new exterior tin and gasoline engines. Up until the late 1920s Cagney built eight-wheeler park trains, but Herschell Co. was another builder, and

100 Bakersfield Californian, Nov 9, 1940

101 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 7, 1942

102 Author's interview, Paul Woollomes, Feb 2003

103 Author's interview, Stan and Lorraine Smock, 2003

there were many smaller companies that made park trains. Some were home-built. In 1936 two teenagers at Frazier Park built a streamlined, miniature, six-ton, seventeen-passenger park train and took it around Southern California on exhibition.¹⁰⁴

"In late 1946," said Woollomes, "Wes Waldon had two of the little locomotives, but one of them was in the barn up on the hill. Wes and I worked it over and rejuvenated it. The other had a worn-out Austin gasoline engine. I was able to line up an Austin car, and its engine fit fine in the train's frame. The next year when another engine went out, I put a small Crosley [engine] in it, and a little bit later I changed the transmission to a fluid drive automatic."¹⁰⁵ Based on recollections of Woollomes and Balasis, one of the cabs was a worn-out factory steamer. By 1950 Woollomes was running both cabs on gasoline.

Most park visitors knew nothing about the tracks, but for Woollomes they were vital to keep the train going, and he told me about scouting in the mountains for mining-car track he could take back to the park. Today, no track is left on the roadbed, most of the roadbed itself has vanished. In a picnic area just west of park headquarters there are barbecue-grills that look very much like track reclaimed from the Hart Park Railroad.¹⁰⁶

Barbecue-grills, last evidence of the Kern River Railroad

Woollomes thought the gauge was 12-1/2 inches, which means 12-1/2 inches of separation between rails. Ed Kelley at www.discoverlivesteam.com wrote, "By 1960, sixteen-inch gauge was pretty common, and 18-inch gauge was mainly found among smaller manufacturers or in home-builts. I'd say there's a substantial chance that this Hart Park mystery train was a homebuilt. But the McGarigle

104 Bakersfield Californian, May 11, 1936. One of the builders was Walter Osborn, Jr., son of Bakersfield City Attorney Walter Osborn. Young Osborn became a Superior Court judge.

105 The first Crosley was produced in 1938 and had a 13.5 HP engine.

106 The barbecue-grill appears to have been manufactured from 16-lb track, 5/8 inches-high and 3/4 inches-wide at the top (42 mm x 34 mm). The term "16-lb track" means 16-lbs per three-ft section. Thanks to George Gilbert Lynch.

Machine Shop did turn out several 12-5/8-inch gauge locomotives that were sold under the Cagney and Armitage-Herschell name, as did the International Miniature Railway Company of Elgin, Illinois prior to 1910."¹⁰⁷

Woollomes told me his train stories. "Oh, I had experiences with that train. The engine pulled two cars, and since each car seated 12 people, there was some weight back there. Sometimes we'd pull out of the station and discover that kids had put grease or butter on the track, and then the engine would just sit there and the wheels would spin. We had to ask the passengers to get off and help us push the train past the greased track." ¹⁰⁸

Other juvenile shenanigans were more dangerous. One afternoon in May someone in a picnicking group of eighth graders dragged a tree limb across the track, and it derailed the train. Woollomes reflected, "Well, yes, we had to watch out for everything. For one thing if we had some open seats when we left the station, I had to watch out for kids jumping on. That meant I had to drive and look behind me at the same time."

During WWII, Woollomes laid 900 miles of gasoline pipeline for General Patton's advancing Third Army. In 1946, veteran Woollomes returned from the war, bought the Hart Park railroad, and broke his ribs driving it. He explained, "One time as I turned my head back to the front , I saw we were heading right into a big rock somebody'd rolled onto the track. I don't know how many people it took to put it there because one kid couldn't have done it by himself. Just seconds before the train hit, I ducked down and braced myself against the car behind me. The little engine jumped right up in the air. It didn't even derail, but that car I was holding on to bounced up and cracked my ribs." ¹⁰⁹

A Taft store owner named Earl Gifford and friends were injured

107 Email to the author

108 Author's interview, Paul Woollomes, 2003

109 Ibid.

when a car broke an axle and overturned. Waldon trucked the car to Bakersfield for repairs, and three days later it was back on the track. Then on a Sunday afternoon in March 1946, an engine pulling two cars was zipping around a curve and an axle broke. The rear car overturned and spilled out its human occupants, most of whom were children. Mrs. Dana Horton was slightly injured and her six year-old daughter Linda broke her foot.¹¹⁰

The railroad tunnel was another source of trouble said Woollomes. "The tunnel was a shed that was open at both ends for the train to go through. In the morning we'd swing the doors up on their hinges from the bottom and hook them open. Well, I knew that some kids had been sneaking around and letting the doors down, but I was pretty careful to watch out, except for this one time when someone let it down and I didn't know it. I came around the curve and had just enough time to warn the passengers and duck my head. We crashed through the door. I was lucky. The driver's seat was low enough that I was able to get my body under the engine's cowling before we hit. Thank goodness nobody was hurt."¹¹¹

He mused, "I'd drive the train myself Monday through Friday, but Saturdays and Sundays we were so busy I had to hire more help. A county employee came in on his days off, but I also had another driver, an old fellow who lived downtown, who showed up for work dressed up in a railroad hat and overalls. We ran the two trains for six or seven hours a day, maybe more."¹¹²

"The Fourth of July and Easter were the biggest. One week I sold 7000 tickets. We'd load up one train with passengers, and by the time we pulled out of the station the other train would pull in. Usually this took a little coordinating. Right next to the tunnel was some extra track, really a little jog, or siding. When we saw that the other train wasn't quite loaded, we'd wait or slow down at the siding until they

¹¹⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Mar 22, 1946

¹¹¹ Author's interview, Paul Woollomes, 2003

¹¹² Ibid.

got filled up."¹¹³

The numbers seem accurate. The Fish and Game Barbecue and Sheriff's Barbecue of the 1930s and 1940s attracted hordes of humanity. Woollomes' train tickets were fourteen cents for children and twenty-four cents for adults, which suggests that his summer gross could have amounted to \$5400 in 2023 money.

Park use in the 1970s was a fraction of what it was just after WWII. Woollomes expanded the concessions, and in 1956 and 1957 he installed a crank-operated, circular-track, kiddy-car-like ride. He also added little boats and installed a small roller coaster, but the number of visitors had peaked, and over the next decade he sold off his equipment. "One of the engines, the old steam one in the barn, I sold to the husband of a woman who worked for me. He hauled it to East Bakersfield and was going to redo it, but then he died. The last time I saw the engine his boys had taken it apart, and it was all over their back yard. I asked her if she wanted to sell it, but she told me there was no way, and she didn't care to talk about it."¹¹⁴

The other cab was in good condition. "A man from north of here talked to me quite a bit about it, and then he made me a good offer on it and all the cars. He loaded them on a U-Haul[®] truck and trailer, and they were gone."¹¹⁵ What remained of the Kern River Railroad was the shed, station, track, and roadbed. Woollomes hired two men and paid them \$1,000 to pull everything down, pile it up, and haul it away.

The park's west gate is flanked by eight palm trees. A few feet into the park, on the right next to the road, is an insignificant water seep. Following the earthquake of 1952 the old mineral spring on the hill went dry, and the county tried drilling for water there at the west entrance. Don't taste it. It's oily.

West gate, built in 1941

Readers might enjoyed a self-guided tour of the park. Head east

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

on the road from the entrance, and note the eight-foot dirt embankment on the right. This berm, or dyke, held back reservoir water used for irrigation, boating and swimming.

John O. Hart stone. 1937

Eight-tenths-mile farther along is Hill Street, and just beyond it is the John O. Hart Memorial, a six-foot, water-worn volcanic rock "marked and hollowed by the eroding forces of nature".¹¹⁶ Hart found it Kern Canyon and thought it would make an interesting monument. Somebody remembered that because it was brought to the park in 1937, three years after Hart's death. That person was Y.B Stokes, formerly a road foreman for the late supervisor. Stokes told the story of Hart's stone to Gus Vercammen, who was a member of the East Bakersfield Progressive Club. Vercammen got permission from the Board of Supervisors to move the stone. The East Bakersfield Progressive Club, Percy Branson, and Sam Myers of the State Division of Highways got help from a local, heavy-equipment operator named Jack Shields, and Shields moved the 4.5-ton monolith to the park. On September 6, 1937 the Hart family were honored guests at its unveiling. Paul C. Newell, editor of the Shafter Press delivered the eulogy.¹¹⁷

Dedication of the Hart Memorial, 1937

Southeast of the stone are two of rock pillars topped with what look like beach balls. They are spheres of concrete, and the stonework they rest on are chunks of petrified wood collected by SERA workers on the Mojave Desert in 1935.¹¹⁸ The path between them leads up to where the public watched the antics at the plunge. When the plunge was demolished, about 1992, the concrete decking and the ten-foot, masonry-and-rock mineral-water fountain by the road were bulldozed

116 Bakersfield Californian, Jan 10, 1930

117 Bakersfield Californian, July 17, 1947. The newspaper incorrectly identified the date as 1947.

118 Author's interview, George Gilbert Lynch, 2006. An account from 1936 said the rock came from the Kern County mountains. Historian George Gilbert Lynch (1931-2010). When I met George in 2002 not much was going in local newspapers and magazines about our local past. He did a lot to turn that around. See more about George is at <http://www.HistoricBakersfieldAndKernCounty.com/articlePages/persons1.html>

into the old plunge. The cyclone fence surrounding the equipment yard today conveys the plunge's enormous size. The adobe building that once at the east end for lockers and changing rooms was also demolished. An equipment building is there today.

Hart Park Plunge was called the second-largest swimming pool in California, but the adjective could be grander. William Whiteley who lifeguarded ten years at San Francisco's Fleishacker Pool told me it formed a giant capital letter T that had a vertical dimension of 100 by 1000-feet and a horizontal dimension of 40 x 150-feet, which suggests the Fleishacker Pool occupied two and a half acres. It held salt water. The old Hart Park Plunge held river water, and that makes it the largest fresh-water plunge in California.

To the right of the beach-ball pillars is what looks like an eight-foot-tall concrete incinerator. In fact it is one of the many irrigation standpipes in the park, some of them really tall. All have valves in their bases, and in the old days when a valve was opened, water from the hillside reservoir rose in the standpipe to its level in the reservoir, and water was allowed to spewed forth from the tower's bottom until until one of the valves was closed. The standpipes are historical relics of an earlier technology.¹¹⁹

Water in the flowing spring on the hill smelled like like boiling eggs. Next to the road below the medicinal flow was wall of faucets, from which visitors filled their jugs. The water was also diverted to five frame bathhouses on the hillside. In 1936 Neveill A. Whitsett, who was a masseur with twenty-four-years experience, filled the bathhouse tubs with the warm, pungent water.¹²⁰ Across the road from the plunge's site is a flat-top, river-rock, gazebo-like structure. The drinking faucets inside once flowed the pungent sulfur water. SERA masons who built it in 1935 were paid \$48 [\$1100] a month.¹²¹

119 According to Frank Stramler, one of the tanks on the hillside was part of the sulfur-water drinking system. He said the second tank was installed to supplement a second-generation irrigation system.

120 Bakersfield Californian, May 4, 1936. A heater boosted the temperature of the water. The bath houses were removed in the 1950s.

121 Author's interview, George Gilbert Lynch. 2008. His father worked on the park project.

Wall of Fountains. Mineral spring is above on hill. About 1930.

Park bathhouse ad, 1936

About half way up hill is a six-foot-diameter cement curb protruding above the grass. The steel plate that caps it covers John Barker's attempt to strike oil. Barker hit an aquifer at 1300 feet, his bit stuck, and water rose out of the hole at fifty-five gallons a minute. In the 1920s that endless stream was diverted into the hillside reservoir, and a little later to the the bathhouses and drinking fountains.¹²²

Concrete curbing next to the plunge's parking lot is stamped "WPA 1941." The Works Progress Administration and other government work projects provided jobs for families, and that work made most of the park's infrastructure that we see today.

Curb stamp north of old plunge

On the hillside east of the old reservoir some stone monuments. Between 1928 and 1940, at least forty-one community organizations planted groves of trees. The advertised their benevolence by attaching bronze markers to granite boulders, and a few still carry the badges, but most are gone, victims of many years of vandalism, which was a problem for the county since the park's opening in 1929. The surviving oak and bottle trees were well-chosen and hold on despite neglect.

In 1939 Kern County Employees Association asked the Board of Supervisors to build Howard Gilkey's proposed amphitheater, but approval never came, and today a Sheriff's target range is there. Another unfulfilled Gilkey project was a three-stage waterfall designed for the high hill. Labeled Dante's Cascade, it received strong support from Societa di Mutuo Soccorso of Kern County, but Depression realities killed what could have been a most impressive waterfall.¹²³

Not a memory is the block of concrete that is out of view by to the hillside. It is inscribed "JROUAM," and it is obviously missing a top piece. The Junior Order of the United American Mechanics once

¹²² Gilbert Peter Gia, Barkers Ranch, Ditch, and Springs 1874-1909 (at Humanity Commons)

¹²³ George Gilbert Lynch, "Project Dreams For Early Hart Park," unpublished manuscript, Dec. 2, 2005

boasted more than a million members, but today the anti-immigrate, far-right-patriotic JROUAM is history.

Visitors once crowded the park, treasured it, and donated their time to improve it. Some say that in the late 1950s a rowdy element took over the park, but others say its decline was caused by bigger paychecks and the advent of television, Disneyland, and Magic Mountain. Connie Basbis Pappas answered it best when she said, "It was a peaceful place, the train was slow, and the merry-go-round was beautiful, but we grew up and moved away."¹²⁴

< O >

¹²⁴ Author's interview, Connie Basbis Pappas, Aug, 2003