



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

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John Barker's Ranch, Ditch, and Springs 1874-1909

By Gilbert P. Gia

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More than a hundred years have passed since John Barker entertained visitors at his hot springs on today's picnic grounds behind the Foss-Kern Golf Course.¹ And even more years have passed since he operated Rio Bravo Ranch at the mouth of Kern River Canyon.



Bluff at old Barker Springs Overlooking Kern River

¹ This location east of Hart Park was succeeded by the privately-owned Kern River Country Club and then by the Boy Scout Reservation. The Scouts sold the property to Kern County in 1944, and it has been a municipal golf course ever since.

But Barker was not the first to arrive. This area's modern history began in late 1861 when Solomon Jewett came to raise sheep² and later to farm with his younger brother Philo.³ In 1872 the Jewetts applied for and were granted a patent to the land,⁴ but by 1874 they had sold it to a Henry and Louis Pierce.⁵

Around this time the Pierces hired John Barker, 43, as ranch manager,⁶ and Barker and his family moved into the old Jewett ranch house that sat "*about three miles from the mouth of Kern River canyon...upon a high bluff overlooking Kern River.*"⁷ The Pierce ranch soon became known as Barker's Ranch.

In the decade of the 1870s Barker either owned or acquired control over a patchwork of nearby properties totaling about 2,000 acres, most of which were along the south bank of the river below Kern Canyon and downriver as far as six miles from Bakersfield. The Littlefield Research report of 1992 noted that Barker filed an affidavit dated August 2, 1876 in which he testified he had staked claim to a parcel of land in November 1874 and "*built a house on said land.*"⁸

² "In 1861 the Jewett family built an adobe home near the river crossing and began raising sheep and farming in the small valley. Their three room, adobe home was only a few hundred yards below this bridge [Rancheria Bridge] and the 'Rio Bravo Crossing,' as it was called in the 1860's, was near the homestead which was situated on the South bank. ... Thomas A. Baker, Colonel Baker's son, was visiting with the Jewetts that night when the flood [of New Year's Eve 1867] roared down upon the adobe structures. He related later in his writings, 'The water came up so fast we barely escaped the house before it was completely washed away.' ... The first bridge built for the old Rancheria Road was constructed in 1893 for horse and buggy." George Gilbert Lynch, *The Rio Bravo Ranch* (unpublished manuscript, 2009)

³ Ibid. In 1869 they produced 65 bushels of Irish potatoes, three tons of hay and grazed five horses, 50 head of cattle, and managed 12,000 sheep.

⁴ Patent No. 1423, T29S-R29E, S-1/2 of SW-1/4 and the S-1/2 of SE-1/4 of Sec 2. Littlefield, Douglas R. *Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Private Land Ownership and Control of Rio Bravo Ranch*, Littlefield Research Associates, Oakland, California, (monograph) Dec 10, 1992

⁵ The Jewetts removed down river and farmed near Bakersfield.

⁶ In 1885, when Pierce filed for patent on nearby land, a corroborating witness to Pierce's preemptive claim was John Barker, identified again as ranch manager.

⁷ *Daily Californian*, Aug 8, 1892

⁸ Littlefield, op sit, p 14: The S-1/2 of SW-1/4 and the S-1/2 of the SE-1/4 of Sec 34, T28S- R29E. Most of Sec 34 is north of the Kern River and about one mile west of Rancheria Road. The house he built might have been an expansion of the Jewett house.

Barker also cooperated with the Pierces to expand their holdings. In 1874 he applied for a patent on acreage below the Pierce ranch, but even before taking legal possession, he sold the application to the Pierces.



The Pierce/Barker Rio Bravo Ranch was engaged in sheep production and limited farming, but in 1875, 1876 and 1877 the business was damaged by dry years, which caused Barker to drive his bands into Kern Canyon for grass. In spring 1877 he lost 15,000 sheep to starvation,⁹ but ranch income was also set back by competition from Australian wool.

Probably near the end of the dry period Barker started building a canal, and by 1882 he was completely out of the sheep business and instead was raising cattle and field crops.¹⁰ The *Kern County Gazette* wrote in 1878, "Barker and his partners own several thousand acres of

⁹ *Morning Echo*, Jan 1, 1907. It quoted Barker about the snowstorm on that day.

¹⁰ An 1885 state map shows canals on the north side of the river and across from today's soccer fields. Two are marked "Pierce and Barker Ditch" and "Barker and Wilson Ditch," both of which suggest that Barker was a partner in bottomland irrigation before 1885.

valuable bottom land on both sides of the stream for five miles below the mouth of the canyon."¹¹

In 1878 the Kern County Gazette described an ambitious canal plan, but it was not one for the Rio Bravo Ranch:¹² The Kern County Board of Supervisors, acting as water commissioners, granted on August 3, 1878 a franchise to Louis Pierce, Barker, and Craig to construct a canal, or ditch, with its head at Kern Canyon.¹³ Later in August the same newspaper noted that "*certain gentlemen*" would start a canal project at Kern River Canyon.¹⁴ The Gazette added that a preliminary survey by "*Messrs. Barker and Botsford*" found that a \$50,000 canal could irrigate 30,000 acres on the plains south of Sumner and east of Bakersfield.¹⁵ But the canal plan faded from the news, and it did not reappear until 1891. (More below)

When state water engineer James D. Schuyler visited Barker in 1879, Barker agreed to monitor and record the flow of the Kern River.¹⁶ Schuyler noted then that Barker said he would construct irrigation ditches on both sides of the river, and that he, Barker, expected to also erect a wheel to raise water to his higher fields on the south bank.

Schuyler returned in November 1880 and observed that Barker was operating a 30-ft-diameter water wheel that raised 500,000 gallons of water daily to fields. Barker also then had in use a private ditch eight-foot wide and 300-feet long that irrigated his lower fields. Schuyler noted that in spring 1880 Barker had cultivated 300 total acres of

¹¹ Described as five miles in length in 1892 (*The Californian*, May 23, 1892); A Kern County Land Company map from 1895 shows separate holdings for Barker and Pierce on parcels adjacent to the river above and below today's Hart Park.

¹² This was reported in the *Kern County Californian*, Jul 25, 1891.

¹³ *Kern County Californian*, Apr 11, 1891. The account said the instrument "was recorded Friday in recorder's office." The Border Water Commissioners document originally dated Aug 3, 1878 granted to John Barker, F.W. Craig, Louis Pierce, G. A. Botsford, V.A. Craig, and R. E. Arick the following: the right to construct a canal 30-ft wide on bottom and 4-ft deep to carry 25,000 inches of water of Kern River to be taken out a point near the mouth of the canyon and to run through T 29-R 29, sec 29-30, 32-30, 31-29, 32-27, 32-28 and 32-29. That general area is one mile northeast of today's intersection of Weedpatch Highway and CA-58 freeway.

¹⁴ *Kern County Gazette*, Aug 31, 1878

¹⁵ *Ibid.* The town of Sumner (later Kern City) was about two miles east of Bakersfield.

¹⁶ *Report of the State Engineer to the Legislature of the State of California – Session of 1880, Sacramento, California*

wheat, corn, chufa [*C. esculentus*], amber cane [*sorghum*], potatoes, grapes, pomegranates, oranges, lemons and limes, the limes having been grown from seedlings planted four years earlier.¹⁷

Ditch building here was especially expensive, and for that reason Barker tapped the river where its banks were lowest,¹⁸ but blasting and laborious hand shovel-work extended over several years.¹⁹ The ditch water, which came from a fall near today's Rancheria Road Bridge, was carried via a series of twists and turns along the south bank for about three and one-half miles.²⁰

Sometime before July 1891, Barker, who was then perhaps in need of funds, sold his rights to 30,000-in of Kern River water²¹ for \$25,000 to George C. Doherty and partners who had resurrected the plan of 1878 to supply water to Sumner by canal construction and by creation of three storage reservoirs in the foothills east of Bakersfield.²²

¹⁷ *Pacific Rural Press*, Nov 27, 1880

¹⁸ *The Californian*, May 23, 1892

¹⁹ During construction Barker found fossil remains. (*Daily Californian*, Apr 11, 1891 referencing *Southern Californian and Kern County Weekly Courier*, Aug 9, 1878)

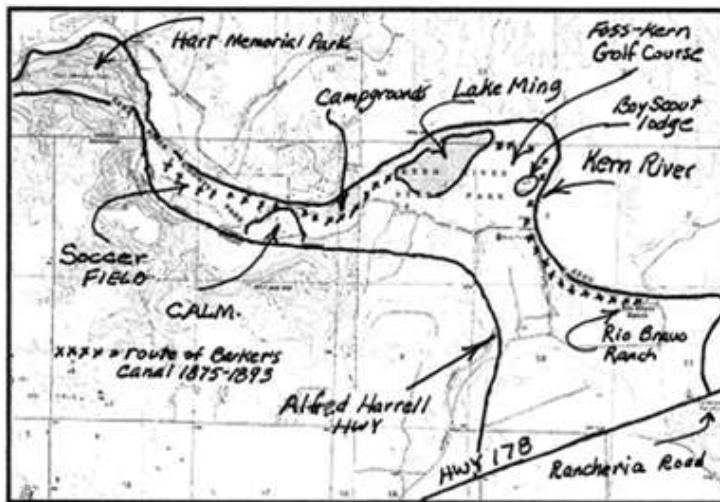
²⁰ Barker's ditch might have profited from upstream blasting work inside the canyon in 1888 by the Kern River Canyon Land and Water Company. (*Kern County California*, Mar 24, 1888)

²¹ If 30,000-in represented *miners inches*, then Barker sold rights to a great amount of water. One *miners inch*, not standardized in the West, is a water flow of around 1.5 cu ft/min.

²² "One near Wade, one near Gant's place in sec 6-30-29 and one in the vicinity of Maschmeyer's in section 26-30-29." (*Daily Californian*, Jul 25, 1891); Barker said he had obtained his water rights in 1878. The follow-up recording of 1891 was part of the resurrected plan to create three major reservoirs that would expand farming there. That plan was not pursued owing to construction of the East Side Canal.



John Barker



Barker Springs is marked here as *Boy Scout lodge*.

By 1892 Barker completed two additional miles, which made the ditch between four and six miles long.²³ It then irrigated both the level areas east and west of today's picnic grounds behind Foss-Kern Golf Course:²⁴ The eastern part extending roughly from Rancheria Road to the picnic area, and the western part extending from the picnic area to

²³ *The Californian*, May 23, 1892; *Daily Californian*, Aug 8, 1892. Accounts of the length vary.

²⁴ "Away up amid the sedimentary bluffs which line the banks of Kern River ... the banks give away upon one side or the other forming beautiful upland valleys." (*The Californian*, May 23, 1892); Traces of the Barker ditch remain today.

Hart Park.²⁵ Of the ditch, a newspaper wrote in 1892, "*This enterprise which was conceived several years ago has been built little by little until this season.*"²⁶

The term *Barker Springs* did not appear in newspapers until the early 1890s, although by then Barker, like other older residents, was well-acquainted with the many free-flowing mineral springs then common along the river.²⁷ Another such spring was on Barker Ranch. *The Californian* wrote in 1888, "*In Prof. Hilgard's Biennial Report to the President of the University of California, appears the analysis of Barker's Spring water from Rio Bravo Ranch, Kern county: 'The water was clear and possessed no peculiar taste or smell.'*"²⁸

Exactly when Barker opened Barker Springs is not known today, but by the early 1890s it was a recreational destination. For several Sundays in May 1891 a driver known as "*Papa Newman*" operated a 10-mile-round-trip, one-dollar excursion from Arlington Hotel at 19th and Chester to "*Fabulous Barker Springs.*"

²⁵ The land covered by today's Lake Ming was one of those areas. *Daily Californian*, May 23, 1892: "*The Rio Bravo ranch covers the uppermost of these open spaces reaching clear to the mouth of the canyon. A few miles further down the river there comes another glade or valley now known as Barker's springs and for the purpose [of] irrigating this open spot John Barker has just completed a canal.*"

²⁶ *Daily Californian*, May 23, 1892; *Kern County Californian*, Jun 2, 1883: Barker's crews uncovered fossil remains. "*Without searching for them (in fact having no time to do so) he has often come upon the remains of the extinct amphibian, and other monsters of the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods, of which he has made valuable contributions to the collections of our State University and Academy of Sciences.*"

²⁷ By then Barker had lived in Kern County for about 16 years. Gilbert Gia interview of 2003 with Frank Stramler who was in charge of Hart Park maintenance 1959-1968. (unpublished): "*Up until the 1960s or 1970s a large sulfur well was at the NE corner of California Living Museum.*"

²⁸ *Kern County Californian*, Mar 18, 1888. Exactly which spring is unknown today, but because the water had no smell it is unlikely it was at today's Hart Park.



On the Fourth of July 1891 a Californian reporter observed merrymakers on Barker's rafts surrounded by "swarms of festive grasshoppers." Visitors also came to the springs to hear 60-year-old Captain John Barker recite Milton, Poe, and Scott and entertain his guests with recollections of early Kern and Tulare Counties.²⁹

During this period Barker experimented with the natural gas that emitted as bubbles from a sulfur spring near the bank of the river. Through successive improvements in design, Barker used the low-pressure vapor to light and heat his one-story cottage on the mesa.³⁰ An 1893 newspaper described it in this way:

"He cleaned the spring to seven feet in depth, curbed it with a rock wall and set a gasometer about two feet in diameter and five feet high, with its open end ten inches below the surface of the spring. The gas thus collected – and it accumulates rapidly – burns with an intense yellow flame signifying perfect combustion and is far superior to ordinary manufacture gas."

²⁹ See *San Joaquin Vignettes: The Reminiscences Of Captain John Barker* by John Barker. Edited by William Harland Boyd and Glendon J. Rodgers, Kern County Historical Society, 1970

³⁰ *Daily Californian*, Aug 8, 1892. "The Barker Springs, The Coming Resort For People of Kern"; *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 6, 1930. "Playwright on Visit Here Spins Old Oilfield Yarns" Maurice V. Samuels said, "Barker laid a small-dimensioned pipe to his ranch home kitchen and burned the natural fuel. He was the first to do this."

*At a little distance away, higher up on the river bank, he has bored a well twenty-three feet deep, which yields more gas than the original spring and of equally good quality. And at the place fully fifty feet in vertical height above this well he has discovered indications promising more gas than at either of the other two places, just as good, moreover, in quality.*³¹



Photo courtesy Mrs. Emma (Barker) Harris

John Barker and the gas well he developed on Kern River in 1896. This is thought to be the first use made of Kern River gas

Barker and his Gas-O-Meter

After the Kern River flood of 1893 Barker Springs was no more. The river's surge also washed out the bridge near Rio Bravo Ranch,³² ruined Barker's canals and fields, and flooded Bakersfield streets. Water damage was widespread, and it came at a time of economic depression that affected most of the United States. Barker Springs passed out of the news.

³¹ *The Californian*, May 23, 1892

³² The bridge was replaced in October. (*The Californian*, Oct 5, 1893)



Gilbert Gia and Barker's Ditch, 2007. (Photo: George Gilbert Lynch)

John Barker set about rebuilding and improving Rio Bravo Ranch,³³ but within two years he lost it in a mortgage foreclosure to Henry Miller.³⁴

In public letters to Mr. Miller, Barker's pen dripped vitriol:

"You have your 'pound of flesh,' but there are still two weapons left to me that are beyond your reach – my tongue and my pen. These for you are, for whatever time may be allotted to us, a 'Nemesis' that will stick to you like the poisoned shirt of Nesbits [sic],³⁵ burning and festering and blistering though the rhinoceros-like cuticle that envelops you, as long as you live to come and cruse the earth with or presence, which in the course of nature cannot be a great while. As I know that you will neither understand nor appreciate this style of writing, and I also

³³ A wooden flume that conveyed water from inside the canyon to the ranch was completed in summer 1894. (*The Californian*, Jun 30, 1894) A month later four miles of similar construction was started. (*The Californian*, Jul 23, 1894)

³⁴ www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org: "Henry Miller immigrated to the United States in 1847 ... and formed a partnership with fellow German immigrant Charles Lux in 1858. By the end of the nineteenth century Miller & Lux had become America's largest integrated cattle and meatpacking enterprise, owning close to 1.3 million acres of land in California, Nevada, and Oregon." Miller sold the Rio Bravo Ranch on Nov 18, 1895. In 1917 Louis V. Olcese bought it.

³⁵ The *Shirt of Nessus* in Greek mythology was once a popular reference in literature.

know that the slang and filth of the slaughter house would be better suited to your tastes, and that to address you in such language is very much like casting pearls before swine, still, knowing that you have a corral full of lawyers feeding and fattening at your cribs, it consoles me to know you can get some of them to interpret it for you.”³⁶

In 1900, a few months after oil was discovered on the Kern River, Barker formed an oil exploration company to drill on his property inside the east end of today’s Hart Park.³⁷ The crew bored through 18-1/2 feet of rock and seven feet of shale before striking hard rock, and in August the bit jammed at 1,000 feet. Barker abandoned the hole, but for years and years sulfur water issued forth and flowed into the river below.³⁸

John Barker was nearly 70 in 1901, which was a time when average life expectancy was 49. By then he suffered from diabetes and walked with difficulty. A photograph of him from the time shows an ample, white-bearded old man seated in a one-horse shay.

In December, Barker leased his melon-growing property (near today’s soccer park) to Sweet brothers and removed to Kern City to be with his unmarried daughters, Lottie and Emma.³⁹ In 1903 he moved, again, to Bakersfield this time, perhaps to be closer to hospital.⁴⁰ During the next six years Barker made railroad trips to Los Angeles for medical care.

Barker was unwell, but he was not idle: With support from the Kern County High School science department, in 1905 he experimented with

³⁶ *San Francisco Call*, Nov 18, 1895 as reprinted from Bakersfield news wire of Nov 17

³⁷ T29S, R29E, Sec 5

³⁸ In 1921 Kern County acquired most of what we now know as Hart Park and in 1928 built a hillside reservoir that received water from the river and from Barker’s failed well. The reservoir was used for irrigation, swimming, and boating. Today a metal and concrete wellhead marks Barker’s old well about half-way up the grassy hillside at the park’s east entrance. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Oct 16, 1928; Nov 16, 1928; *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 14, 1920); See also *100 Years at the Park*, www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/community1.html

³⁹ In the mid-1880s Barker’s only son died on the Rio Bravo Ranch. In 1886 his daughter Nellie married Bakersfield dentist J. F. Bonham.

⁴⁰ *Daily Californian*, Aug 4, 1903

bacterial inoculation of alfalfa.⁴¹ That winter, at Bakersfield Club entertainment night, he delivered two recitations, one in Scotch and the other in German.⁴² In December he ran for justice of the peace, Bakersfield Township.⁴³ However for the next four years his name seldom was in the news.

On Sunday, May 30, 1909 John Barker died at St. Clair Hospital in Bakersfield.⁴⁴ His funeral was elaborate and the pallbearers eminent: Paul Galtes, Henry A. Jastro and Walter James (of the Kern County Land Company), John M. Jameson, County Judge Jackson W. Mahon, A.M. Minner, Louis V. Olcese, and S.P. Wible.

Upon Barker's death his estate devolved to his daughters, Nellie, Lottie, and Emma. Two weeks later Lottie married Alonzo D. Whitmore, a local accountant, and in 1911 Emma married Bakersfield attorney Daniel Harris.

In 1913 the sisters and their husbands signed an agreement with a Miss Anna T. Harrington granting her 90 days to buy 495 acres of the Barker estate "where it debouches from the canyon" in Sections 2 and 5, T29S-R29E. The offer also allowed her to sell the property "to anyone she later designates." Within days, Miss Harrington bought it for \$40,000.⁴⁵

The parcel presumably included Barker Springs, or so said the Californian. But it was wrong, and assuming that was the case, it had its own ideas: The springs would be a country club.

From the time Bakersfield was settled, Breckenridge Mountain had attracted residents desiring to escape the summer heat. But the trip

⁴¹ *Daily Californian*, Oct 17, 1905. Agronomists of the time experimented with alfalfa damaged by blight in order to determine which alternative was economically indicated, disease control or crop abandonment. See Walter G. Sackett, *A Bacterial Disease of Alfalfa*, Bulletin 158, Agricultural Experiment Station of the Colorado Agricultural College, Apr 1910 (Google Play Books)

⁴² *Daily Californian*, Nov 23, 1905

⁴³ *Daily Californian*, Dec 14, 1905

⁴⁴ St. Clair Hospital preceded today's Mercy Hospital. Mortuary notes show the following: cause of death, uremia [acute kidney failure]; "EG" tattoo on left wrist; Four wagons to graveside; \$244 charge for all [That charge was high compared with others in the book]; casket "size 6/0 XX". (Payne Mortuary File, Kern County Genealogical Society, Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, California)

⁴⁵ Equivalent to about \$950,000 in 2015

there from Bakersfield took a full day, which meant a resort closer to town was desirable.

"Being but thirty minutes ride from Bakersfield, the property is easy of access by automobile, motorcycle, old family Dobbin, or bicycle ... One might make the run out and dine at the club, take a fresh water swim or hot sulphur [sic] bath, play at golf or tennis, and either return to town or spend the night at the outing place."⁴⁶

The Californian looked at the sturdy foundation of an unfinished stone and concrete house and thought it might support a second floor. *"And with but slight expense this could be converted into a fine building of the Mission style."⁴⁷* The article concluded, *"It is the intention to have golf links and tennis courts, and the contour of the country is ideal for golf. A large swimming pool will be established on the river's edge, and there will also be hot sulphur water bathing."⁴⁸* The older buildings, it reported as a fact, would be torn down and shade trees and shrubs planted immediately.

But then nothing happened, and nine years passed unremarkably until the news that the grounds would become a private country club.⁴⁹ The John Barker era had ended.

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⁴⁶ *Bakersfield Californian*, Mar 8, 1913. Dobbin means horse.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See *Kern River Country Club*, www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/sports1.html