



WHEN NOT TO WRITE LOCAL HISTORY

By Gilbert Peter Gia

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The phone call was unexpected. But I'd had one like it before. Moreover, historians had already given me fair warning. The lesson learned is there's a time to write local history, and there's a time not to. Allow me to explain.

About fifteen years ago I interviewed men who had known Prohibition as teenagers, and our conversations about booze and Federal agents almost always turned to brothels. Here's what Ken K. told me about Bakersfield of 1930. "There were whorehouses all along 19th Street--Black, Mexican, White, any kind. I found out about all this because I delivered clothes and orders to the houses. I remember a Black woman who worked at one of the houses. She sent out for clothes, and when I delivered them she'd tip me good. The first time I delivered I went in there and the women were sitting around in lounging lingerie that was mostly open in the front. I was just seventeen then. They said, how old are you? I told them I was 18. I remember one of the women raised up her leg to pull on stockings, and she didn't have anything on underneath. All the women looked at me and laughed."

When I spoke with Ken I hadn't yet read anything about prostitution in our history, but then I found Guy Hughes' *Lynn's Valley Tales and Others*, in which he devotes two full pages to the Bakersfield Tenderloin of 1908. That account triggered a grade-school memory of mine of the French Hotel at Pioneer Village and those manikins that used to be in the second-floor

windows. Today I realize they were dressed as "painted ladies", to use a phrase.

In 2001 I called the immanent Kern County historian Dr. Harland Boyd. He'd come here in the mid-1930s to teach history at Bakersfield College, and by the end of his career he had a collection of at least a hundred three-ring binders of local-history research. At the time we spoke he was in his eighties, had a wispy, soft voice, and told me that because of his eyesight he had to give up reading microfilm.

I described my Prohibition interviews and about how those old fellows talked about the "girly houses" -- as Sheriff Charlie Dodge had called them -- and that when a wife or caretaker entered the room the men fell silent. Dr. Boyd paused and remarked, "Well, they wouldn't." He seemed affronted by the topic and said he had no citations on the subject, but he did caution me not to write about living people. That brief conversation was my first and last with Dr. Boyd. He died a few months later, and I came to regret that I hadn't thanked him for his massive contribution to local research.

I stayed on the topic and three or four years later completed a study of Madame Marie Teresa Brignaudy, who from about 1905 until the early-1930s was the notorious madame of the Bakersfield Tenderloin. That study helped Rebecca Orfila of Cal State Bakersfield in her paper about prostitutes in the early Bakersfield censuses. When Orfila presented it before the Kern County Historical Society, the dining room at Maxwell's Restaurant was packed. My story had broken new ground and was worth the effort, but it led me into a related story that I later wished I hadn't done. (More below.)

Author Lee Harold Edwards -- *The Killing of Jim McKinney* -- was a consummate researcher, meticulous story teller, and a razor-sharp writer of facts. When I first met him he was already the author of hundreds of *Wild West Magazine* and *True West Magazine* articles about western bad men. He credited his crisp writing style to Visalia historian Annie Mitchell who had been his elementary-school teacher, but Harold was also retired from the Kern County Probation Department where he had developed reports for criminal trials. I was grateful to him for his encouragement and for his pointers, one of which was evocative of Dr. Harland Boyd: Don't write about anybody who's living, and be careful of the rest. I'd heard it before, but I didn't appreciate the gravity.

My Brignaudy study ended with her death in the early 1930s, but the business of organized prostitution in town was then far from gone -- as those old fellows had so consistently verified. About the time Brignaudy departed this life, a Bakersfield city councilman was accused of running a protection racket and collecting from houses of prostitution. The charge was too hard to prove, but by then he'd come under the public microscope, and he was subsequently arrested for grand theft of an investment firm. He was recalled from office and served time.

I researched those facts for months, wrote the story and posted it. Some time later his daughter called me, and she was upset because of the painful publicity. All of my history was true, but being right didn't make it right. I pulled the story.

Grist for my research sometimes comes wrapped in red ribbons, and that was usually the case when my mother told me about her work as a Juvenile Division detective with the Kern County Sheriff's Office. I put some of her stories on my website because not telling them would have been a loss to the world of comedy.

But one was tragic. Late one night near the end of the 1960s a mother and her common-law husband drove their six year-old from Los Angeles to Wheeler Ridge and around 1 a.m. put her out next to the freeway in the drizzling rain. At 3 a.m. a truck driver passing Taft Highway Exit saw her clinging to a fence. The sheriff put my mother on the case, and several weeks later law enforcement found the parents in L.A.

When officers entered their apartment and informed them they were under arrest for child abandonment, they insisted they had only one daughter, and she was standing right there next to their son, Tommy. At that juncture one of the officers waved to my mother who was out in the squad car with the little girl. The child entered the room and called out, "That's my daddy and mamma!" Tommy immediately smiled and said, "Hi!"

I research the story, wrote it, and posted it. Two years passed. One day a distant adult voice on the phone hesitantly said, "Hello ... I'm the child by the freeway." She was anxious that I knew so much about her. Was I her mother's common-law husband? I laid out my connection and then asked how she found the story. She said she heard it from neighbors. All the kids

around there were talking about it. That instant an immediate stab of remorse hit me for having injured a blameless person.

“Do you want me to take it down?” Her reply: “Yes.”

Local history may be interesting, strange and even creepy, but it also has the capacity to wound. When should a researcher leave well enough alone? Lee Harold Edwards and William Harland Boyd got it right. Naming names can deliver a lot of pain, which explains why I have two detailed research papers that the public will never see again.

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