



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California

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## Seeking Spirits in Canyon Country, 1845-2011

Bakersfield to Caliente via Kern Canyon

ver 3

by Gilbert P. Gia

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**I**n the mid-1970s country-singer Merle Haggard built a house at the Bakersfield end of Kern Canyon, but recorded history of this location goes back at least 125 years more when the Jewett brothers raised sheep and John Barker and the Pierce brothers farmed the land. In 1891 a bit downriver from the canyon near today's CALM,<sup>1</sup> Barker opened a hot springs resort, but evidence of his past endeavors are nearly gone, as are Haggard's orchards and his fish ponds of only a few decades ago.<sup>2</sup>



**Merle Haggard House**

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<sup>1</sup> California Living Museum

<sup>2</sup> See *Fabulous Barker Springs on the Kern River, 1890-98* at <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/business1.html>

The hydroelectric plant humming here just at the mouth of Kern Canyon is not the first. In 1897 the Kern County Land Company installed a similar power plant to supply electricity its farming operations south of Bakersfield, but those generators operated at the whim of the changing Kern River, and Bakersfield's lights frequently dimmed.

In 1907 a tunnel was dug through the mountain above the power plant to provide a dependable water supply.<sup>3</sup> During the digging a tunnel collapse trapped miner Lindsay B. Hicks for ten days. Once rescued, Hicks started a cross-county lecture tour, which lasted briefly; The the public tired of his story and Hicks was jobless.<sup>4</sup> But the tunnel has been supplying the power plant for more than 100 years.

Today my wife and I are driving into the canyon for more history. At the entrance the road narrows-down worrisomely, although in 1876 when a wagon road it was a thoroughly perilous passage.<sup>5</sup> Some road improvements came in the mid-1890s, but not very expensive ones because a more heavily-trafficked route to the upper canyon was in use, Democrat Wagon Road (see map below.) In 1909 Deputy Coroner W.A. McGinn and undertaker A.H. Dixon were in a county car on that winding route when the hearse tilted dangerously and spilled the morgue basket, with body, onto rocks below.<sup>6</sup>

Kern Canyon Road became part of the Lincoln National Highway between Walker's Pass and Bakersfield when the route opened in summer 1923, Democrat Wagon Road fell into disuse, and the canyon became a popular, holiday destination. On July 4, 1941, 5,000 visitors picnicked there.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Bakersfield's Hydroelectric Plant* by George Gilbert Lynch, <http://wwwstatic.kern.org/gems/historicalSociety/Vol553Fall.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.scvresources.com/highways/sr\\_178/highway\\_178\\_tour.htm](http://www.scvresources.com/highways/sr_178/highway_178_tour.htm) for history and historic photos of Kern Canyon road. The faint trace of mining track used in the tunneling project is sometimes visible about half-way up the hillside opposite the canyon road.

<sup>5</sup> *Southern Californian & Kern Co Courier*, Sep 21, 1876, p 2, col 2

<sup>6</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 13, 1909, p 1

**The canyon's beauty remains unchanged. Tree roots widen fractures in car-size boulders, palms and Peruvian Peppers line the river, and tumbling white-water glistens on the silver-gray granite. Above the road loom granite monoliths intimating danger and sparking memories of odd happenings: a boulder that crashed into a driver's lap, a helicopter that landed by a moving truck.<sup>7</sup>**

**At the second powerhouse, completed in 1921, the road again narrows, and at this place experienced drivers, and foolish ones, too, push from behind and encourage us to speed up. We do pull over for them at the next turnout but catch up at a flag man ahead who has stopped traffic.**

**At Upper Richbar Campground we take out folding chairs, watch hawks soaring over old sycamores, and smile at inquisitive squirrels considering us, these seated strangers.**



**Kern River Canyon**

**After Richbar are 15 minutes of climbing road and hairpin turns before the road again widens. Here we consider crossing the modern, concrete bridge and joining the freeway opened in the 1970s, but we do not. Although the freeway bypasses hundreds of switchback turns on the old road, we skip the multi-lane highway in favor of the slower pace.**

**Traffic disappears, steep canyon walls recede, and we gain altitude. A mile farther is the US Forest Service building and a sign pointing to Mill Creek Trail, the same steep-rising path we hiked a few years ago. It's strenuous for the first 50 yards before leveling off onto a broad meadow.**

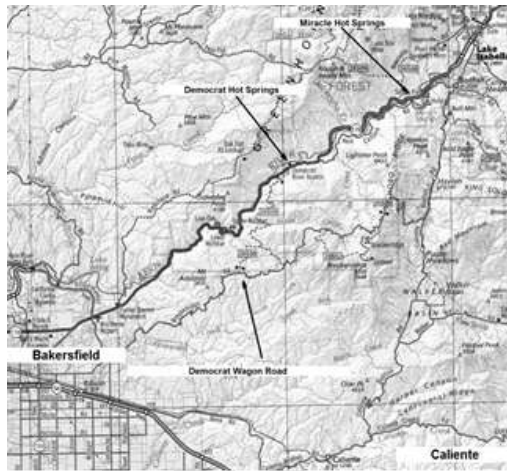
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<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Gia's interview with his uncle, Paul Gia, who frequently drove the canyon road and experienced those very events.

**That path soon becomes steep and challenging, and within an hour the determined hiker comes upon Native American mortars that pock a granite monolith at the top of the trail.**

**No hiking Mill Creek Trail for us today. We putter along at bicycle-speed enjoying purple lupines and white candle flowers of the California buckeye.<sup>8</sup> Ahead are four hot springs.**

### **Democrat Hot Springs**



**Old Democrat Wagon Road at map center**

**Before the Lincoln National Highway opened through the canyon, Bakersfield vacationers bound for Democrat Hot Springs, or Yosemite Valley, drove first to Edison, then to Cottonwood, and then ascended Mt. Breckenridge by way of Democrat Wagon Road. Today at Democrat our odometer says Haggard's house is but 12 miles behind us.**

**By 1906 Democrat boasted a hotel, swimming tank, soaking tubs, and tent cabins, and until late 1927 when eight miles of road from Isabella opened, Democrat was an end-of-the-line destination on Democrat Wagon Road.<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>8</sup> In fall, buckeye fruit (poisonous) look and feel like hardened figs.

<sup>9</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Jun 20, 1927



**Democrat Hot Springs**



**Democrat Hot Springs post card**

The Democrat Hot springs automobile stage left the Arlington hotel this morning at 7:30 o'clock. There are several belated vacationists stopping at the mountain resort who are expected back on the return stage.  
\* \* \*  
Mrs. J. R. Taylor, of Fellows, and

**Bakersfield Californian, November 20, 1913**



**Bakersfield Californian, July 20, 1916**

### **Democrat Hot Springs**



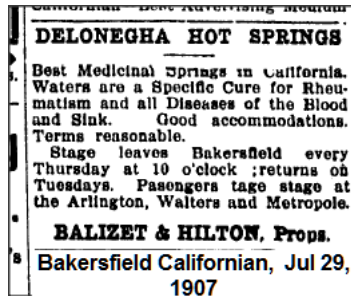
**Democrat closed to the public in the early 1970s, but the management of today will open the lodge for larger family gatherings and business conferences.<sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>10</sup> [www.DemocratHotSprings.com](http://www.DemocratHotSprings.com)

## Delonegha Hot Springs

Delonegha is also a private hot springs, but unlike Democrat it is never open to the public. After road improvements made the other canyon hot springs more easily accessible from Bakersfield, Delonegha's business declined.<sup>11</sup>



In 1931 Peter J. Forthoffer stole a new car in Bakersfield and vanished with it. Three years later the dismantled vehicle was found in a cave near Delonegha Hot Springs. Sheriff Ed Champness suspected that Forthoffer for the second time had demonstrated his mechanical aptitude. In 1919 he'd escaped from the Kern County jail by picking a lock with a fork.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1890s the boarding house at Delonegha welcomed stages that had been two days on the road from Bakersfield, but today, in consideration of coils of barbed wire, a chain-link fence stretching down to the river's edge, and a "no trespassing" notice spray-painted on nearby rocks, we decide to move on.

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<sup>11</sup> GPS 35.5574-118.6117

<sup>12</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 16, 1937, p 9. The cave was probably Greenhorn Cave across the river from Delonegha. (J. C. Jenkins, Ruby Johnson Jenkins. *Exploring the Southern Sierra, West Side, Volume 2*, 1995)

## Remington Hot Springs



Path to Remington Hot Springs



Remington is little-known and unmarked. We search for a wide, dirt turnout about where the highway starts its descent just ahead. On one side of the canyon road is a trail to Remington Ridge while on other is the trail down to Remington Hot Springs, which means 300 feet of switchbacks. We do not stop here today.

Ahead is Borrell Road turn-off where we might merge with the freeway. In 1904 Henry E. Huntington built Borrell hydroelectric power plant here and the string of flumes that collect Kern River water from above Kernville. Borrell's electricity once powered Los Angeles' Red Line trolley system. Musing briefly on Huntington's wealth and influence, we continue on the old road.

Shortly ahead is a barbed wire fence and another sign warning "No Admittance." Peering below we see remnants of Huntington's old flume. But no stopping here, either. Two miles distant is Miracle Hot Springs and Bodfish.



## Miracle Hot Springs



**Cabins below Miracle Hot Springs**

**Miracle about 1955**



**Miracle is 42 miles from Bakersfield. That statistic is clear, but the name needs explanation. Over the past 120 years it's had four names -- Compressor Hot Springs, Clear Creek Hot Springs, Hobo Hot Springs, and in 1947 Miracle Hot Springs. The photo below from about 1928 shows the back of the hotel (middle right,) the river below, and the canyon road at left.**



**The hotel, built in 1927, burned in 1975.**

**In 1979, Hollywood sound engineer Mike Brillhante leased Miracle Hot Springs cabins and grocery store from the US Forest Service. He installed campsites, RV hookups, trailers, and he built concrete soaking tubs. They turned into money makers at \$2.50 an hour.<sup>13</sup> Miracle Hot Springs also became a clothing-optional destination,<sup>14</sup> but in 1986 the property was not paying its keep.**

**Brilhante said that the charges that the water was unclean were unfounded; The Kern County Health department checked the pump monthly, and the water always passed. Brillhante had ongoing loans and operating fees to pay which were due to a half-dozen agencies. All amounted to \$3,000 a month. He gave up the lease.<sup>15</sup> Brillhante recalled,**

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<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Gia's telephone interview of Mike Brillhante in 2010

<sup>14</sup> Public, nude bathing is allowed in California if inoffensive to the public.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert Gia's telephone interview of Mike Brillhante in 2010

**“After I left, the Forest Service didn’t want anybody else in there, and they bulldozed everything, but they couldn’t break my concrete tubs. They got a Reserve Marine demolition group up there, and they blew them up.”<sup>16</sup>**

**Evidence of man’s impact on Miracle Hot Springs is mostly gone, and its historic access closed, but you can sample the 119 degree water if you approach the spring via Hobo Campground, which is about 200 yards up the river. Keep in mind that the Forest Service doesn’t appreciate changes at Miracle. Pack out whatever you bring in.**

### **Bodfish**

**We see homes, the first since Haggard’s place on the Bakersfield end of the canyon, and although this old road has been interesting, we are glad to be done with it. I am remained that before the freeway was here, my uncle and his family drove the twisty, old road from Bakersfield every weekend and for many more years after they moved to Bodfish.**

**Here begins Hot Springs Valley, which in 1953 lost about half its bottom land when Lake Isabella was formed. Although the road is a straight shot to Isabella,<sup>17</sup> it’s been a time since I visited where my grandfather Ezio Gia and my uncle and aunt Paul and Marie Gia once lived on Easy Street. Nono moved to Bodfish in the early 1960s and set up his trailer on the hillside. I recall he told me that the winters and summers and the mountains here were like the old country, like Collegnago in Tuscany in 1912. Some years ago my wife and I visited cousins in the old country, and then I understood what Nono Gia meant.**



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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> The first Isabella is submerged under Lake Isabella.



**Nono's sign**

**About two minutes up Bodfish Road, Nono nailed-up his own street sign, which I first understood as a hopeful choice for a retired person. He told me later, however, that Easy Street was easier for people to say than Ezio Street.**

**I am immediately surprised that my uncle's house was leveled but not surprised by that lone chimney ahead and long grass swaying over black ashes. I already knew that Nono set fire to his trailer after black-hatted Mafia squinted at him through the windows. Anyway, most of old Easy Street is gone except for the colossal views.**



**Me on Easy Street. Bodfish and Isabella in the distance**

**Leaving old memories behind, we drive to new Isabella shopping center and stop for lunch at Don Pericos. This well-lighted restaurant with clean restrooms, friendly service, and good food makes us forget that although Isabella Dam is no longer filled to the top, it holds back more water than one can possibly imagine. And we are just under it.**

**Submerged beneath the lake is the town of old Isabella, and four miles upriver is old Kernville, also submerged after the dam was filled. Just 20**

years ago I saw naked tree branches of old Isabella poking above the surface.

### Scovern Hot Springs

A forgotten hot spring just southeast of Don Perico's is Scovern Hot Springs, established in 1897. Ownership passed variously over the years,



Kern County Californian, Dec 7, 1889



Scovern Hot Springs  
Sierra Rainbow, April-May, 1958

but by WWII, Scovern had fallen into disuse, and in 1971 the last-remaining buildings were razed by fire.<sup>18</sup> We skip the drive to Kernville, but below is what it looked like about 1948 before the dam was built.



Old Kernville. Fort Aven Legends of the Kern River 1988

<sup>18</sup> Mar 6, 1971. Bakersfield Californian, Mar 9, 1971

## The Road to Havilah



With pleasant thoughts of beans and tacos, we double-back to Bodfish, navigate the steep Havilah-Bodfish Road and at the top are treated to spectacular views of Bodfish, Lake Isabella and the dam beyond. Before 1923 this road was the principle route to and from Bakersfield, but now it's serene. We descend through scrub brush, gray granite, tan rock, ocher earth. We watch for Havilah. It's just a blink on the road.

Col. Thomas Baker sold his Bakersfield hay and oats at this once-busy town, and the trade was so profitable that he constructed a turnpike between Walker's Basin and Caliente wash at today's Bena. Completed in 1867, Baker's Grade, also known as Turnpike Road, was an excellent route to Havilah and continued in use into the early 1900s.<sup>19</sup> Havilah, the county seat from 1866 to 1874, went into economic decline and lost the county-seat title to growing Bakersfield, although in 1877 Havilah's Stretch Mine cleared \$30,000 a week (in today's dollars,) and at the turn of the century the town remained a profitable mining center. In 1897 gold miner Frank Potts drove his wagon down to the Caliente train station to meet his future wife, Hattie Hellifaich, a Brooklyn mail-order bride who was glad to be there.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Havilah Weekly Courier*, May 16, 1868, p 3, c 1. *Visalia Delta*, May 18, 1891. See also, *Inside Historic Kern* [Kern County Historical Society, 1982] pg 71-72, citing "Baker's Grade," *Historic Kern*, Quarterly of the Kern Co Historical Society, Sep 1958.

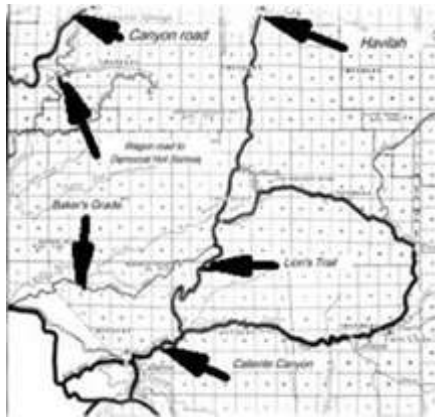
<sup>20</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 25, 1897, p 3

**Havilah's brewery, saloons, hotels, and blacksmith shops are gone. Havilah today is two, quiet farm houses and a shuttered museum that was once its school house. We stop, relax in the shade, commune with the birds and buzzing flies and listen to the deep quiet. We wonder if Mr. and Mrs. Potts' children went to school here, played in Clear Creek behind the school, or chased the ancestors of these blue jays.**

**Back now in the car, we slow on the road for a nursing calf and mother that are indifferently occupying the white line. Under a nearby tree, three of her sleepy-eyed sisters consider us and then return to their grass. The road ascends easily to Piute Springs where a cluster of red and yellow flags and a real estate shack announce an out-of-sight housing development behind a low hill. Here the road descends into Walker's Basin, an eight or nine-mile bowl about as long as it is wide. White settlers came here after 1845, and during the Civil War, soldiers passed back and forth between Fort Tejon and Fort Independence, which was near today's Bishop.**

**Nearby Piute Mountain School is invisible from the road. Its half-dozen teaching staff serve 120 pupils who come in from all around the 250-square-mile Piute School District. In 1984 the firm of Biggar, Frapwell, Ghezzi and Cartnal built the school into the hillside and topped it with a solar array and periscope ventilation system that utilizes the earth's constant 58-degree temperature.**

**The road divides. On the right a sign reads "To Bakersfield-Caliente." Heavy-footed drivers who take this, the Lions Trail, arrive at Caliente in less than 30 minutes, but that road has a 7.5% grade and an elevation change of 3,400 feet. For recreational drivers who have time, it's also a scenic choice.**



Today the weather is nice, and we do have the time, but we chose the longer, flatter route to Caliente by way of Twin Oaks and Loraine. We pass bucolic ranches, skirt abruptly-rising hills, and view tranquil mountains. This peaceful setting was probably not so quiet between 1860 and 1940 when gold, tungsten, and uranium mines were worked nearby. A sign reads "Cowboy Memorial and Library."<sup>21</sup> Last year when we visited founder Paul de Fonville at this place, he told us he had "perhaps the largest collection of branding irons in the world." We didn't see all of them, but de Fonville does have hackamores, harnesses, holsters, dozens of spurs, a variety of ropes, old saddles, a naughty-Nellie boot jack, probably a thousand photos, and one pizzle whip.<sup>22</sup> Cowboy Memorial and Library demands at least two hours of your time.

### Old Amalie Mine



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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.cowboymemorial.org/>

<sup>22</sup> Whip made from a bull's penis



**A empty Foothill High School bus from Bakersfield passes us, but aside from it we see just two other vehicles until Twin Oaks General Store, which in the 1880s was the area's school house. Last year when we visited, the inside decor showed the building's past, and smoking was encouraged.**



**Lorraine in 1918**

**Farther along is Loraine, earlier called Paris. From the 1870s until WWI its blacksmith shop, saloon, and hotel provisioned gold miners working the Zenda, Bright Star, and Barbarossa mines. Today Loraine is gone. In the 1930s, miners forced to sell their gold to Uncle Sam at \$32 an ounce couldn't afford to hire help and pay for electricity.<sup>23</sup>**

**The road follows Caliente Creek into narrow Caliente Canyon. Steep, rocky walls and familiar views make it a Kern Canyon in miniature. Thanks to the keen eye of my friend George Gilbert Lynch during one of our past trips, today we spot tailings from early mining operations. Nearby oak, ash, hackberry, and wild fig trees cling to cliffs, and tucked in the side washes we spy an abandoned house of river cobbles and a suspended shack minus its foundation.<sup>24</sup>**

**Piute Springs is 40 minutes behind us. Just ahead the little canyon opens up to Caliente. In 1951 a three-room school was built on the hill, but at last count the school had but four students. The other activity at Caliente: Rankin Ranch at Walker's Basin comes here to pick up its mail.**

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<sup>23</sup> Eugene Burmeister, *The Golden Years*, Arvin Tiller, Arvin, Calif, 1959, p 24

<sup>24</sup> Periodic flooding of Caliente Canyon has closed the road for months and even caused cabins, and properties, to disappear.

## Caliente Hotel 1918-1950



Caliente, first known as Allen Camp, was named for stock raiser Gabriel Allen. In the 1860s it was a confluence of supply wagons, gold shipments and cattle drives.<sup>25</sup> The Southern Pacific set up operations at Allen Camp in 1874, and shortly later renamed it Caliente. Here, some 3,000 Chinese dug tunnels and laid 20 miles of track to Tehachapi.<sup>26</sup> The railroad's payroll was \$2,000,000 a month, in today's dollars, and during that rail-laying, Caliente camp expanded into a menagerie of tents, saloons, gambling dens, hotels and brothels. In 1909 an explosion of 1-1/2 tons of blasting powder stored at the train depot obliterated most of the town. Gone was the Caliente Hotel and P.J. O'Meara's general store, and what was not blown apart caught fire.<sup>27</sup>

Trains headed up to Tehachapi in 1875 had different needs than those headed down. Steam engines took on water at Caliente and stopped at several other sidings for more before the summit. Trains about to descend from Tehachapi, first cooled their wheels. All the precautions of mortal men were became insignificant in 1952 when an earthquake collapsed several tunnels and closed this part of the line for nearly a month. Today, Caliente sees about two trains an hour.

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<sup>25</sup> A Caliente-Walker's Basin toll road was constructed in 1875. The road company went bankrupt when the Southern Pacific stopped investing in Caliente. (*Courier-Californian*, Feb 14, 1878)

<sup>26</sup> A Chinese cemetery was discovered during construction of the school. [Mike Engle, "1875, Caliente's Big Year," *Desert Magazine* (Palm Desert, CA), Dec 1969, p 10-2)]. Burmeister wrote, "...[M]ore than 300 Chinese laborers ... were buried on the mesa to the east of town until their bodies were shipped to China some years later." (Burmeister, *The Golden Years*). Details about the Tehachapi tunnels, written by Stephen Montgomery of Bakersfield, are in *Underground Bakersfield and Kern County* at <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/community1.html>

<sup>27</sup> *Morning [Bakersfield] Echo*, Jun 16, 1909, p 1, c1-2. The Edison Co was storing explosives for work on a new power station north of Kernville. The station at Caliente was the closest to that project.

**We cross the tracks at Caliente and continue up the hill toward State Highway 58, but at Bealville a train blocks the road. Bealville's historical marker doesn't mention that this was the northern-most part of General Edward Fitzgerald Beale's Tejon Ranch or that he ceded several thousand acres here to the Southern Pacific so the company could build the line to Tehachapi. Beale gave up some land, but when rail service started he shipped steers to the eastern meat-packing market. In 1876, the same year the rails opened between Bakersfield and Los Angeles, US President Grant appointed Beale ambassador to Austria-Hungary. General Beale displayed an ability for the assignment, but he didn't stay. He liked ranching better.**

**That train is still has us waiting. We start the car and tail behind a pickup truck that's left the queue and is bumping along an access road next to the track. Its path crosses over a railroad tunnel; we loop back onto the Caliente road and continue on to State Route 58. Minutes later we quickly merge with the world of 70 miles per hour.**

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