



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

Arson in 1877

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On the evening of April 30, 1877 an arsonist on the second floor of Mattson's harness shop lighted a ball of turpentine-soaked rags he'd packed inside the wall. The burning mass fell to ground level and ignited the enclosure. Fortunately, passers-by noticed the flames and were able to extinguish them with a force pump and water hoses from nearby businesses.¹ The soggy incendiary showed that a madman was trying to destroy Bakersfield. When the Hook and Ladder wagon finally arrived, Babcock pumps were removed and handed out to stores and saloons.²

Three hours later customers at Rice's saloon noticed flames behind the glass door of W.H. Scribner's Emporium. They broke into the building and threw a bucket of water onto the fire. A Babcock finished the job. This time the arsonist forced a wad of combustibles through a small hole next to an outside drain pipe. The newspaper suggested that if the arsonist were caught, he should get "short shrift and a long rope."

Three nights later a pile of brush flared up between two houses in Chinatown. Like the others, this fire was also caught early and was dragged away where it could do no harm.³ Just a week earlier, Bakersfield had been arguing over the need for a fire department, but the day after the Chinatown fire, \$2,000 was placed on deposit at Kern Valley Bank for a fire engine, cisterns, and a fire department. In two weeks a new engine house was christened.⁴

¹ Modern building codes require installation of fire blocks to compartmentalize hollow walls.

² Kern County Democrat, May 4, 1877. The pumps were probably hand held fire extinguishers from the Babcock Mfg. Co., New York.

³ Kern County Democrat, May 4, 1877

⁴ Kern County Democrat, May 4, May 25, 1877.

On the night of June 5 the arsonist succeeded. Miller Smith who lived north of the two-story school house was outside about 10:00 PM when he noticed a yellow glow from behind the school. In fact, small flames were around the school's south wall--the wall that faced away from town. Smith ran for help; the fire bell rang; the town awoke; and Bakersfield's new fire engine rolled out of the new engine house.⁵ Nearby, a ditch was running bank full, and the pumper went to work on the fire. The little flames were extinguished, and for a while it seemed that the fire was beat.

But smoke was still aggressively boiling from the upper story, and then fingers of flame appeared higher on the walls.⁶ The arsonist's method was about the same as before: He'd stuffed saturated rags inside the wall, and flames rose inside the space like in a chimney.⁷

The pumper threw streams of water as the firemen broke-out the windows and entered the hall, but then bright flames appeared around the belfry. In minutes the roof was an inferno.⁸ The new fire department simply lacked the tools to whip this fire.⁹ An eyewitness wrote, "The fire burned comparatively slowly afterward, but none the less certainly for nearly an hour, before the once handsome structure sunk in a mass of embers and ashes."¹⁰ The school had been "an ornament to the town and an indispensable requisition by the growing educational wants of the community."¹¹ The wood-framed structure had been built for \$6,000, and it burned to the ground before the end of its first term.¹²

In December 1876, just months before the fire, Miss Said and Mr. Prewett opened the new school for its first classes. Pioneer teacher

⁵ Southern Californian, Kern County Weekly Courier, Jun 7, 1877

⁶ KC Democrat, May 25, 1877

⁷ KC Democrat, Jun 8, 1877

⁸ KC Democrat, Jun 8, 1877

⁹ Firemen were not able to direct the water inside the walls. In 1877 most new fire engines sold were steam-driven pumpers. Towns with limited funds typically bought fire engines such as the 8 HP pumper built by Knowles Steam Pump Works of Warren, MA. The engine cost \$800, weighed about 4,700 lbs, and could be moved by horse or man-power. (William T. King, History of the American Steam Fire Engine. Pinkham Press, 1896.)

¹⁰ KC Democrat, Jun 8, 1877

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² KC Democrat, Jun 8, 1877; SC, KCWC, Jun 7, 1877: "This last incendiary act exasperates every citizen, and violent measures will be likely to be adopted to rid the town of the festering vagabonds whose life here seem to be spent in efforts at destruction." Tramps were convenient scapegoats. In September, a Pat Hogan was caught setting fire to C. Miller's bakery. The fires stopped after his arrest. (Lynn Hay Rudy, *Granddad: Hugh A. Blodget in Early Bakersfield* (1999), p 26. (22750 Hwy. 1, Jenner, CA 95450)

Virginia Jameson recalled, "Mr. Prewett was in those days spending his hours out of school in mastering the subtleties of law, and the cases in court were more interesting than the schoolroom work. He was particularly interested in the famous Jim Hayes murder case, and morning after morning about 10 o'clock the folding doors would suddenly be thrown open and the assistant would hear, 'Miss Said, I'll be absent from the room a few moments -- please take charge of the class.' And off to the courthouse the principal would go, followed by the older boys, often not to return until early afternoon session began."¹³

Jameson wrote, "This new interest in law frequently caused Mr. Prewett to be oblivious of the surroundings. One morning he came as usual to school, tied his horse in its accustomed place in front of the lot, and was ready to enter the building, when, picking up his eyes he saw with astonishment that there was no school house before him. It had been burned to the ground the night before."¹⁴

[Footnoted version is at

<http://sites.google.com/site/historicbakersfieldkerncounty/Home>]

¹³ Bakersfield Californian, Oct 7, 1907, p 6, col 3-5. Virginia Jameson wrote this article at the request of Kern County Superintendent D.W. Nelson.

¹⁴ Ibid.