



## Presidential Visits to Bakersfield, 1880 and 1891

By Gilbert P. Gia

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**G**eorge W. Wear and the Bakersfield Democrats had reasons for giving the cold shoulder to President Rutherford B. Hayes when his train stopped at near-by Sumner in 1880. The election of 1876 had been a great disappointment to Mr. Wear, editor and publisher of the *Kern County Democrat*, and his story has a familiar, contemporary ring. Samuel Tilden, Rutherford B. Hayes's Democratic opponent, had received 52% of the popular vote, but a congressional panel awarded Hayes additional electoral votes from Florida, and that made him 19th President of the United States. Hayes' moderate position on Chinese immigration also angered Californians, including Wear's friend Pavey who remarked a few days before Mr. Hayes' arrival here that Pavey, himself, wouldn't take 10 steps to see the "fraud." <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hayes had been an active field commander in the Civil War and had four horses shot from under him. In 1864 he showed particular gallantry in spearheading a frontal assault at the Battle of Cloyd's Mountain. Although other presidents had served in that war, Hayes was the only one suffering injuries. He was wounded five times.



President Rutherford B. Hayes

**Republicans had to carry the Pacific states in the election of 1880 to elect James A. Garfield, and to that end President Hayes conducted a whistle-stop junket across the country. In the course of that trip he became the first-seated US President to visit Kern County.**

**Hayes' travel accommodations came free of charge. The locomotive, passenger car, dining, and baggage car were gratis from Union Pacific executives, and although the accommodations were comfortable, they were quite paltry compared to the luxurious standards of later executive trains.**

**Newspaper coverage of the trip focused on the President and his entourage: First Lady Lucy Webb Hayes, Secretary of War Alexander Ramsey, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, Army Surgeon Huntington, E. W. A. Hitchcock (a senior security agent for General Western Railroad), and the President's 22 year-old son "Rud."<sup>2</sup>**

**In the second week of September 1880, the train crossed into California at Truckee and continued to the railroad's northern terminus at Redding. The Presidential party boarded stages for Rosenberg, Oregon, and there took a train to Portland, the Columbia River, Walla Walla, and Seattle.<sup>3</sup> The group then returned to Portland where they embarked on an ocean steamer to San Francisco. At Oakland their special, Union Pacific train awaited to carry them south into the San Joaquin Valley. The ultimate**

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<sup>2</sup> Rutherford Platt Hayes, known as "Rud," had attended Michigan State University, and in the year of his father's trip Rud graduated from Cornell University.

<sup>3</sup> *Kern Co. Gazette*, Oct 9, 1880: Note: "The Presidential party are now in Oregon."

**destination in Californian was Los Angeles where the party would campaign before returning East via Arizona.**

**Under bright moonlight on October 22, 1880, the Hayes train stopped for ten minutes at the Southern Pacific Sumner Station just east of Bakersfield. The next day an article appeared on page three of the Kern County Gazette. It began with the words "President Rutherford B. Hayes... who secured the position through fraud and corruption..." The editor, George Wear, noted that as the train approached Sumner that night, the town's fire-bell was sounded, "and those of our citizens who would raise enough enthusiasm, started for the depot to witness the fraud. The cornet band was out, and the cannon was there to belch forth on his arrival. When the train came to a halt, the President was loudly called for, and he responded in a short speech."**

**Wear added how other towns had received the President. "[The] poor were allowed to see him as well as the rich, though he has only been the guest of bankers, railroad kings, and corporations. He has failed to create the unbounded enthusiasm with the masses that his managers supposed he would. Republican leaders should have played a stronger card, for as it is, the affair has only created disgust. The train moved off, and our citizens returned, Republicans in ecstasies and the Democrats enjoying the knowledge that this is the last Republican President that the country will have -- at least for a long time."<sup>4</sup> The election a few month later proved Wear wrong.**

**Twenty-three years later Wear wrote again about the Hayes' visit but cautioned readers in advance that 1880 was "a long time to remember minute details... but the gist of the recitals and the truth is what I have of it, and if my memory errors in minor details, no harm will be done anyone." This is how Wear described the 1880 visit:**

**"Gentlemen," remarked Charlie Maul, "An old incident just occurs to me. When President Hayes passed down the railroad -- let**

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<sup>4</sup> *Kern Co. Gazette*, Oct 23, 1880

me say that was in 1880 or 1881 -- I forget which -- there was a big crowd at the depot to see him. His train was to arrive at about nine o'clock at night. When the people were preparing to go to the depot someone asked Pavey if he was going. 'Me going! No!' Pavey replied, 'What would I go for? What do you suppose I want to see him for? It was Tilden, the man who justly beat him for President that I would go for, but I don't want to see Hayes. He ain't my kind of man. I wouldn't go ten steps to see him. No, sir, I will stay right here.'

"Charlie Maul then continued, 'So the boys went that night. And the next day they didn't say anything to Pavey. Finally, curiosity got to itching Pavey so bad that he had to ask, 'Well, what did the old fraud say?' Ed Palmes, who was standing next to Pavey, narrowed his eyes, and whispered to him, 'Well, Pavey, old Scribner climbed up there on the platform to welcome Mr. Hayes, and then Scrib says to Hayes, 'As an active Republican I'm glad to welcome you, Mr. President. The President shook his hand warmly and replied, 'You have served the country well, and perhaps saved the Republican Party from defeat. Don't call me 'Mr. President --call me Rutherford.' "

Pavey liked Palmes' story, but what Pavey didn't know was Ed had set him up for the next part of it:

"So then,' said Ed, 'We saw the President put his hand up and shade his eyes, and he looked all around amongst the people, and finally he turned to Gen. Sherman up there on the platform, and he whispered something to him.' The boys who were listening to Charlie started smiling, and sure enough Pavey piped up and said, 'Well, did anybody hear what he said?' And Ed turned to Pavey with a serious look and answered, 'Why, Hayes looked at the General and said, 'Bill, somebody's missing out there. Where's Pavey?'"<sup>5</sup>

The President's tour of the West was rewarded by the election of Republican James A. Garfield. But in 1884 Democrats did get a president,

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<sup>5</sup> Daily California, Sep 23, 1903

**Grover Cleveland. Wear's delight lasted until 1888 when Republican Benjamin Harrison became president, even though the Democratic incumbent Grover Cleveland received a larger percentage the popular vote. Once again, George Wear suffered through the term of a "fraud" president.**



Republican President Benjamin Harrison

**Wear might have acknowledged some of Harrison's successes: The admission of Idaho and Wyoming to the Union, passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, and enactment of pension legislation. But the editor probably pounded Harrison for his support of high tariffs and his ties to big business.**

**But the declining national economy, shrinking US treasury and widespread unemployment in Harrison's term soured voters and made swing votes critical in the election of 1890. Voters turned on the Republican Party, and its chances in the election were as doubtful as they had been in 1880. In April 1891 the party sent President Harrison on a cross-country rail tour.**

**Harrison was an intrinsically quiet man. The openness of the White House tried him, and later years he recalled, "It is an office and a home combined -- an evil combination. It is open to visitors from 10 am to 2 pm-- without card or introduction. There is not a square foot of ground, not a bench nor a shade tree that the President or his family can use in privacy. Until screens were placed in the windows of the private dining room, it was not an unusual incident for a carriage to stop in front of them while the**

occupants took a gratified view of the President and his family at their breakfast or lunch."<sup>6</sup> Harrison might have welcomed the cross-country tour.

Unlike the presidential trip of 1880, the Harrison's trip of 1890 was fully-peopled and elaborate. Luminaries included First Lady Caroline Harrison, millionaire Postmaster-General John Wanamaker and wife, and Secretary of Agriculture Jeremiah McLain Rusk. Lesser-knowns aboard were six Harrison relatives, his private secretary<sup>7</sup>, and a military aide. The supporting staff included conductors, cooks, waiters, stewards, porters, a baggage master, and a barber.<sup>8</sup> Along for the ride three reporters from the United Press, Associated Press, and Press News Association.<sup>9</sup>

The President's Special Train fitted up at the Pullman Car Shops at Wilmington, Delaware, was the perfection of the builder's art. Behind the engine and coal car came the Azatlan carrying a generator for cabin lighting and a pump for pressurization of the 141-gallon, potable-water supply.<sup>10</sup> Behind the Azatlan, it and the other special cars were connected by "enclosed vestibules."

All the cars were built to European-monarchy standards. The Azatlan's library and smoker room were fitted with polished, mahogany desks, sofas and chairs upholstered in seal-brown plush. A newspaper wrote, "Electric screw-fans are at each end of its smoking compartment so that when the press representatives are weary of the 25-cent Havana atmosphere they can cut it up by turning the current on."<sup>11</sup> This car also housed a larder stocked with wines and liquors.

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Harrison, *This Country Of Ours*, By Benjamin Harrison. New York, C. Scribner, 1897

<sup>7</sup> Probably Elijah W. Halford

<sup>8</sup> In 1880 President Hayes' son had to leave his train at Cheyenne, Wyoming, to get a haircut.

<sup>9</sup> Los Angeles Times, Apr 10, 1891

<sup>10</sup> Opulent railcars of this period were assigned names.

<sup>11</sup> Washington Post, Apr 13, 1891; Los Angeles Times, Apr 20, 1891



**Behind the Aztlan came the dining car Coronado illuminated by silver, electric lamps. Its dining tables were appointed with white linens and sterling-silver plate, the car's woodwork was brilliant-white, the upholstery red plush, and the curtains green plush.**

**Next was the New Zealand fitted-out with a double drawing-room and two sleeping apartments for the exclusive use of Mr. and Mrs. Harrison. The woodwork was white and gold, interior surfaces were upholstered in velvety, steel-frieze blue plush, and the curtains were soft terra cotta.**



**Behind the President's car came the Ideal, a drawing-room-car made up of one large room with six adjoining drawing rooms. Each was finished in salmon-and-white with gold-mottled woodwork. The seating was mahogany, "exquisitely upholstered in white hair."**



**The last car was the Vacuna, a combination library-observation car with 16 chairs aligned to oversized French windows. Behind the Vacuna's bank of closets were six drawing rooms each upholstered in various colors of silk plush with matching woodwork. At the back of the Vacuna was a 7 x 9-ft open-air speaking deck partially roofed from the weather and fenced with a polished bronze and brass railing.**

**The public didn't hear of Harrison's impending trip until April 3, 1891, but reporters were present in late-evening April 14 when the the Aztlan's dynamo was started. The Washington Post observed, "Soon the electric wires running from one end of the train to the other were tremendous with the subtle fluid. The incandescent lights were turned on and a fairy scene presented."<sup>12</sup>**

**At exactly midnight Harrison's train left Sixth Street Pennsylvania Station, and he and his party began their 30-day-plus tour to the Pacific Coast, a round-trip of 9,332 miles. The Boston Globe wrote that the President had a smile on his usually somber face.<sup>13</sup>**

**But the Daily Globe was not enthusiastic. It estimated the tour's cost would be about equal to Harrison's annual salary, and it wrote, "These cars that are bearing Caesar Harrison and his presidential fortunes could buy a first-class farm in Kansas... He and his party of 14 are therefore expending at least \$1,500 a day of somebody's money, for no one has any idea that Mr. Harrison will pay a solitary dime for all the splendor and luxury... A direct appropriation from the treasury for the purpose, it's plain, will never be**

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<sup>12</sup> Washington Post, Apr 14, 1891

<sup>13</sup> Daily [St. Paul, MN]Globe, Apr 14, 1891; Los Angeles Times, Apr 14, 1891



made, but 'my Postmaster General' as Mr. Harrison calls Mr. Wanamaker has a vast discretion in the making of mail contracts, and how can he fail to deal generously during the next two years with the presidents of the great lines who have entertained him, and his master, as men were never *[before]* entertained by railroad princesses and potentates?"<sup>14</sup>

Harrison had made several short rail tours before, but this time Mr. Wanamaker had to coordinate an expansive itinerary. Switchmen and dispatchers across the country sidetracked and idled rail traffic so the President's fast-moving special could make its punctual stops in Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Arkansas.

Harrison was at El Paso on April 21, 1891, two days later at Riverside, California and at 7 pm arrived at Pasadena.<sup>15</sup>



Harrison at Santa Ana, April 23, 1891. Photo: Santa Ana Public Library

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<sup>14</sup> Criticism prompted Harrison to give Wanamaker a personal check for \$10,000.

<sup>15</sup> Weekly [Bakersfield] Californian, Apr 18, 1891

Waiting at Los Angeles was the largest public assemblage in the town's history. The next day Harrison's party left for San Fernando, Saugus, Santa Paula and San Buenaventura. On Friday, April 24 Harrison was at Santa Barbara, where he stayed one day. In the early hours of Saturday, April 25 his train doubled back to Saugus, switched to the branch line to Mojave and Tehachapi, and later that morning descended into the San Joaquin Valley.

Compared to President Hayes' late night, whistle-stop of 1880, Harrison's welcome to Bakersfield was extravagant. He had served with bravery and distinction in the Civil War, but a local connection also boosted his welcome. Some months earlier he had appointed Truxtun Beale as United States Minister to Persia. Needless to say, the *Daily Californian's* politics also influenced its effusive coverage of Harrison's visit of Saturday the 25th.

The day before his arrival prominent women headed by Mrs. Dinkelspiel, wife of the department store owner, met at the Baker and Sumner Street depot to adorn its esplanade with flags, rose garlands, and branches and fronds from pepper and palm trees. Wrote the *Californian*, "Some of the Mexican residents of Sumner asked permission to hang a Mexican flag with the others, and permission was gladly given, for it was a very happy thought of our adopted countrymen."<sup>16</sup>

Two hours before Harrison's arrival the crowd already had swelled, "and by the time the flower-covered engine came slowly steaming in, there must have been a thousand people gathered, all eager to see the Chief Magistrate of the United States. There were six cars to the train, and in the vestibule of the rear car, which stopped just beyond the depot right at the street crossing, Pres. Harrison and his party were seen seated. As the train stopped the President arose, took off his hat and bowed to the assembled spectators."<sup>17</sup>

Kern County Judge A. R. Conklin, businessman W. E. Houghton, and Charles E. Sherman who was an acquaintance of Truxtun Beale stepped to the platform to meet the presidential party as it emerged from the train.

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<sup>16</sup> Kern County Californian, May 2, 1891

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

**When the President appeared the huge crowd cheered enthusiastically and began throwing roses.<sup>18</sup>**

**Harrison's speeches over the past week had been patriotic but non-political. Today he was in excellent oratorical form. "My friends, I am very much obliged to you for your friendly greeting and for these bouquets. You must excuse me if I seem a little shy of the bouquets. I received one in my eye the other day, which gave me a good deal of trouble... It has been a very long journey and has been accompanied with some fatigue of travel, but we feel this morning, in this exhilarating air and this sweet sunshine, refreshed with your kind greeting, as bright and more happy than when we left the National Capital." He concluded, "We are one people absolutely. The government at Washington... is dependent upon no man. It is lodged safely in the affections of the people, and has its impregnable defense and it's assured perpetually in their love and veneration for law." Eager spectators grasped the President's hand. He seemed glad to extend it and offer pleasant words.<sup>19</sup>**

**Women called out loudly for Mrs. Harrison, but the answer came back that she was at breakfast. That caused a good deal of disappointment, but Mrs. Wanamaker appeared instead and waved, and the crowd seemed satisfied. After cheering and applause, loud calls were made for Postmaster-General Wanamaker to step forward. He gave only a brief good-morning and goodbye because the car by then gave a little lurch and the train moved slowly away from the station, but two or three eager spectators held on to the Vacuna's railing to get a last hand shake and goodbye.<sup>20</sup>**

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



Harrison at Tulare. Photo: San Joaquin Valley Public Library System

**Mrs. Caroline Scott Harrison's breakfast table was not the reason she stayed in the car; she was showing the first symptoms of tuberculosis. Several months after the tour Republicans nominated Harrison for a second term. Not until much later did the public learn of Carrie Harrison's illness.**

San Diego Historical Society



**Mrs. Harrison's health worsened and the President devoted much more time to her care. In deference to that tragedy his opponent, Grover Cleveland, stopped almost all of his own campaigning. The final vote for president in California was Cleveland 118,151 and Harrison 118,027, but the nationwide vote was decisively for Cleveland, as it was in the Electoral College. Harrison wrote in later years, "After the heavy blow of the death of**

**my wife, I do not think I could have stood re-election." <sup>21</sup> The First Lady died October 25, 1892. She and Mr. Harrison had been married 40 years.**



The Sumner Railroad Station in 1905

**As rancorous as politics was 100 years ago, the Californian's reporter wrote gently and nostalgically about Harrison's brief visit. Old Peter Wible had arrived quite early at the station that morning. A chair was set out for him on the esplanade, and he watched the gathering crowd with great interest. Sometime later he remarked, "I voted for Jackson in 1828 and have had the best health and good fortune to vote at every presidential election since." Those words meant that for 15 presidential elections and six decades Wible had cast his vote. The Californian noted, "When the train arrived, Mr. Wible wished to shake hands with the President, but the crowd was so dense and eager that Wible concluded not to risk the effort for fear of being rudely hustled by younger and more active men. And yet there was not one in the whole crowd but if he had known of the old gentleman's wish would have cheerfully and hardily made way for him."<sup>22</sup>**

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<sup>21</sup> John Whitcomb, *Real Life At The White House: 200 Years Of Daily Life At America's Most Famous Residence*. New York : Rutledge, 2000

<sup>22</sup> Kern County Californian, May 2, 1891